



CASTEL
DEL MONTE

BY
NATHAN GALLIZIER

195
1/6

150 1/2

Black Mountain North
ACME Co. Inc.
240 Long Beach Blvd.
Long Beach 2 Calif.

Richard Kahle,
3405 B St.,
San Diego,
Cal.

इम क से।

1974 年 4 月

Castel del Monte

WORKS OF
NATHAN GALLIZIER



Castel del Monte	.	.	.	\$1.50
The Sorceress of Rome	.	.	.	1.50
The Court of Lucifer	.	.	.	1.50



L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
53 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



“‘HAVE YOU SEEN ME BEFORE, OTTORINO VISCONTI?’”

(See page 284)

Castel del Monte

A Romance of the Fall of the
Hohenstaufen Dynasty in Italy

BY NATHAN GALLIZIER

ILLUSTRATED BY H. C. EDWARDS



BOSTON · L. C. PAGE
& COMPANY · PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1905
BY L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
(INCORPORATED)

All rights reserved

Published February, 1905
Third Impression, April, 1907
Fourth Impression, November, 1910

COLONIAL PRESS
Electrotyped and Printed by C. H. Simonds & Co.
Boston, U. S. A.

SRLF,
URL

51450-0

***T**O THE WEDNESDAYS
OF THE PAST*

Introduction

BEHIND the cypress-clad hills of the Eternal City the sun had set, and the last lights of the swiftly going day were gleaming on the waves of the river which had changelessly sent its waters toward the sea through centuries of hope and fear, of pride and shame, of glory and disgrace.

As the last glow vanished before the purple of the oncoming twilight, dense thunder-clouds rose higher and higher above the Tyrrhenian Sea, and began swiftly to overshadow the ancient capital of the Cæsars. Pall-like the black shadows fell upon the Piazza Colonna, hiding the lofty columns of Mars the Avenger, and darkening the gray pavements of the Forum of Augustus. The deep and ominous hush which preceded the storm was intensified by the silver chime of the convent bells from distant Aventine, their soft music singing the message of peace to the disturbed heart of nature and of man.

But how marked was the contrast between the time when splendid and gorgeous pageants filled the streets and piazzas, when pompous processions of cardinals and prelates, surrounded by the gilded arms and shining mail of the pontifical guards, passed by, while the incense curled its mystic spiral wreath around the victorious panoplies of the Church, and now, when the strangely clad and more strangely armed rabble of Rome crept

through the streets and over the waste fields of Campo Marzio. A vacillating mob, to-day the prey of the Colonna, to-morrow the victims of the Orsini, they surged with pale and anxious faces around the consecrated circuit of San Giovanni in Laterano, and thronged about the ponderous well-guarded portals, over which hovered the grim spectre of death.

Pope Urban, the Fourth, was dying.

In a darkened chamber the three cardinals of Narbonne, Orvieto, and Cosenza watched with anxious, careworn faces round the couch of the man who, with iron grip and relentless hand, had shaped the destinies of Italy, had inflamed anew the dying embers of strife between Guelph and Ghibelline, had hurled anathema upon anathema against the imperial house of Hohenstaufen, and laid ban and interdict upon the descendants of Emperor Frederick the Second. The only persons who, at his own behest, had been admitted to the sick-bed of the pontiff, they seemed eagerly to await the result of the diagnosis from the lips of the hooded disciple of Æsculapius, who was bending over the pale, emaciated form among the cushions.

From without the rumbling of thunder, distant, yet menacing, the ever-increasing roar of the approaching tempest, the fitful gusts of the gale, the sullen mutterings of the crowds, divided even now in hatred and love, reëchoed through the darkened chamber.

Powerful stimulants had roused the aged pontiff from a protracted swoon almost like the sleep of death. Slowly he turned his head toward the Greek physician, fixing upon him his questioning gaze, as penetrating at this last stage of his illness as it was when the thunder of his voice was wont to rouse the Conclave.

The Greek placed a phial containing a clear liquid

upon an ebony table, and nodded in response to the mute interrogation.

"The hand of the King of Shadows hath passed over thy brow," he said. "Thou wilt not behold the orb of the waking day."

"I thank thee," the pontiff replied, in tones hardly above a whisper, while his white emaciated fingers removed a stray lock of gray hair from his clammy forehead. "Your lying Roman doctors had promised me another day. How short the span of time between life and eternity!"

He attempted to raise himself upon his elbows, but fell back upon the cushions. The ravages of the fever had consumed the old man's strength.

A blinding flash of lightning, followed by a terrific peal of thunder, wrapped the entire city from the region of the Lateran to far-off Trastevere, and intermingled with the violent gusts of the wind rose the clamour of the crowds to the chamber of the dying pontiff. At first he heeded it not; his thoughts seemed to linger in the past. Nervously his fingers played on the silken cover, as if they were unconsciously digging the grave which was so soon to receive what was mortal of the High Priest of Christendom.

"The star of Hohenstaufen has reached the horizon,—it is on its downward course," he soliloquized, abstractedly. "In the sands of Cosenza, Alaric sleeps, and Theodoric, whom they styled the Great, at Ravenna. The plains of Vesuvius cover Totila and Teja; verily, Italy is the graveyard of Northern ambition!"

"Bring the tiara," he spoke to Antonio Pignatello, Cardinal of Cosenza, who was bending over him. "I feel death approaching—I will die a Pope—as Urban should."

The majordomo hastened to fulfil the wish of the dying pontiff. With trembling fingers the cardinals assisted him in clothing Urban in the great pontifical chasuble, and placing upon his head the tiara of Constantine.

Strange sounds were in the air without. The gloom was rent by incessant flashes of lightning. Crashing peals of thunder reverberated through the Seven Hills, and the hurricane howled, as if witches were chanting their weird incantations over the forgotten graves of dead malefactors. But above the shrieking tempest, the howl of the hurricane, the roar of the thunder, rose shrill the tumult of the populace. Rome was in the throes of revolt; the factions of Colonna and Orsini, of Ghibelline and Guelphs, were once more arrayed against each other. In every region of the city rebellion tossed her flaming torch against the authority of the pontiff, while with tongues of fire and voice of thunder heaven itself seemed to cry out against the fickleness of the Romans.

Urban's countenance was truly terrible in this, his last trial, doomed as he was to behold the crumbling of pontifical prestige and the triumph of his enemies. His eyes stared wildly and crimson foam oozed from his lips. But the paroxysm was short. Raising himself aloft on the cushions, without the aid of the astonished Greek, he gasped:

"To my successor I bequeath the task which I must leave unfinished. In this, my dying hour, I consecrate to the fiends of doom the imperial house of Hohenstaufen! May their light be extinguished! May death and despair be their inheritance!"

They were his last words on earth.

After hurling this final anathema upon his mortal foes, Urban remained for a moment rigid as a statue. Then his fingers relaxed their hold, wildly his arms beat

the air, and, sinking back, the relentless foe of Frederick the Emperor passed the barriers of the beyond.

Jacob Pantaleon, the patriarch of Jerusalem, the cobbler's son, who had to his life's end continued the policy of Alexander IV. and Innocent IV., — Pope Urban IV. was dead.

When the thunder-clouds had rolled to eastward over the Roman Campagna, and once again in that eventful night the starlight gleamed peacefully over the ancient capital of the Cæsars, the comet which for months had lashed the heavens with its fiery tail had disappeared, and was seen no more.

... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..

REFERENCES

-
... ..
... ..
... ..
... ..

Contents

BOOK THE FIRST

	PAGE
I. PALERMO	3
II. LORD AND FOLLOWER	25
III. THE BLACK PENITENT	41
IV. THE SHRINE IN THE FOREST	51
V. THE TORRE DEL DIAVOLO	67
VI. FAVARA	86
VII. COUNT LANDULF OF TRENT	102
VIII. THE MYSTERIOUS FERRYMAN	113
IX. THE RECLUSE OF MONTE PELLEGRINO	124
X. LA ZISA	139

BOOK THE SECOND

I. FATA MORGANA	155
II. THE MAD GIRL	164
III. THE COUNCIL	181
IV. THE GROTTOS OF PROSERPINA	197
V. THE TRYST	209
VI. LEILA	218
VII. THE MASS OF THE DOMINICANS	233
VIII. CONFESSIONS	245
IX. THE TORTURE-CHAMBER	255
X. THE SPECTRE OF THE TORRE	270
XI. CONSPIRACIES	278
XII. THE MIDNIGHT CITATION	283

Contents

	PAGE
XIII. AMOR VICTOR	306
XIV. THE ATTACK ON THE TORRE	320
XV. AN ADVENTURE	334
XVI. THE EXCOMMUNICATION	344

BOOK THE THIRD

I. CASTEL DEL MONTE	361
II. THE SHRINES OF ANGELO DEI LOMBARDI	378
III. THE SHADES OF MIDNIGHT	390
IV. CONVIVUM REGALE	402
V. THE HOROSCOPE	417
VI. THE SPECTRAL MASS	424
VII. THE BATTLE OF BENEVENTO	429
EPILOGUE	444

List of Illustrations

“‘HAVE YOU SEEN ME BEFORE, OTTORINO VISCONTI?’” (See page 284)	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“SHE HASTENED DOWN THE STEPS TO THE LITTER” .	65
“‘GO ON THY WAY, AS I WILL ON MINE’”	160
“‘PROMISE ME NOT ONCE TO LOOK UPON THIS STRANGE PORTAL WITHOUT REMEMBERING YOUR PLEDGE’” .	178
“‘I DEMAND THIS WOMAN, DUKE OF ALTAMURA!’” .	331
“‘BY THE ETERNAL GOD, I HAVE KILLED HER!’” .	399

BOOK THE FIRST

*“ Ed egli a me : Dopo lunga tenzone
Verranno al sangue, e la parte selvaggia
Caccera l'altra con molta offensione.
Poi appresso convien che questa caggia
Infra tre soli, e che l'altra sormonti,
Con la forza di tal, che testè piaggia.”*

— DANTE, *L'Inferno*, Canto VI., 64-69.

Castel del Monte

CHAPTER I

PALERMO

'A SULTRY summer day of the year 1265 was drawing to its close. The sun, which had relentlessly besieged vale and mountain with his fiery rays, was slowly retreating to the west. The distant mountain-peaks of the Bagaria were half hidden with drapery of gold and purple and crimson, and the soft haze of the summer evening floated over the Conca d'Oro. Conca d'Oro — the pearl in the golden shell of the universe — so Emperor Frederick the Second had christened the vale of Palermo. And now in this valley appeared a cavalcade of horsemen, slowly winding around the highroad leading from Monreale to the capital of Sicily.

The troop consisted of about twenty men, all well mounted and wearing the usual accoutrements of the condottieri of the age. A coarse leathern jerkin, breast and back protected with plates of steel, was worn over the body, with cap and leggins of linked mail. Short swords intended for close combat, heavy oaken lances resting in their stirrup and gripped by iron-covered hands well prepared to wield the weapon, were means of defence not to be despised.

At the head of the column rode two persons. The younger one would not fail to recognize as leader, even if his costly garments had not in themselves denoted his rank. A graceful knight of some twenty-six years, Ottorino Visconti seemed at first sight hardly old enough to be the captain of a band of warriors; yet he had practised the military calling under the eyes of one of the greatest leaders of Lombardy, had at his hands received the military belt and the stroke of knighthood, and had eagerly, ever since he was old enough to wear cuirass, espoused the cause of his great kinsman and champion of the Northern Ghibellines, Matteo Visconti, imperial viceroy of Lombardy.

On this occasion Ottorino Visconti had abandoned the heavy armour, which lent so warlike an appearance to his cavalcade, and the scorching rays of the Southern sun had proved the wisdom of so welcome a change. An azure mantle, upon which was artfully embroidered the Golden Viper of his house, covered a suit of dark green velvet, which closely fitted his youthful, well-shaped limbs. A hat of the same colour as the mantle sat gracefully upon the finely shaped head. A white heron's feather, which waved as he rode, formed a striking contrast with the dark hues of his hair. His face was fair, though slightly sunburned, and from his dark brown eyes there gleamed many a merry glance at his grim companion. This individual, in virtue of his rank as subordinate commandant, carried a banderol on the point of his lance and was furnished with a shield in addition to his other arms. So much of his countenance as was visible beneath the steel cap displayed a grim set of features, seamed with many a scar, short black hair, touched with gray, and a thick beard to correspond.

At times this worthy kept even pace with Ottorino

Visconti, at times he allowed himself to drop somewhat behind. Altogether he at first sight revealed a marked resemblance to a huge wine-cask, crammed into masculine attire, and set upon an iron-gray Norman. At other times he appeared like a sailboat on angry sea-waves, and it seemed as if he were steering himself with the aid of the tremendous lance, which rested upon his stirrup.

For some time the travellers proceeded in silence, probably being too fatigued for conversation, or perhaps because the still and sultry calm, into which the evening gradually closed, produced an effect of lethargy upon their spirits. Suddenly at a turn of the road they came within full view of Palermo, rising out of the valley, her countless cupolas, spires, and pinnacles piercing the transparent air.

Bringing his steed to a standstill, Ottorino scanned with eagerness the scene which unrolled itself before his wondering gaze. Numerous groups of pilgrims enlivened the paths leading to the gates of the imperial city; many groups of knights, with their vassals and retainers, noblemen and serfs, poured forth from hidden or secluded roadways; sometimes, too, an abbot with all his monastery, or an abbess with her gentle recluses, ambled on sleek mules across the narrow vale, attended by armed retainers in the livery of some feudal baron. Some were travelling as if to a carousal, others as to a funeral, some armed, others almost naked; beggars, princes, priests, nobles, vassals, soldiers, and condottieri trooped on for once in peace and mutual forbearance. Devotion also took many curious forms, but most conspicuous in the throng was a group of Spanish pilgrims, with the cockle-shells of St. James of Compostella in their broad hats, and singing loud hozannas as they went.

The impending coronation of Manfred, Prince of Taranto, as King of Sicily, Capua, and Apulia, had brought to the shores of Trinacria the representatives of almost every Ghibelline principality of the peninsula. Only the narrow vale of the Oreto now separated from the city the several cavalcades, which had almost simultaneously disembarked from their galleys, of which the Visconti's was the most remarkable for its size and splendid accoutrements; but the mist of glory, shed over the city by the setting sun, confused the perception of distance to such a degree that the throngs appeared nearer to the gates than they really were.

"Palermo! Palermo la bella!" exclaimed Ottorino, giving way to his enthusiasm. "There she stands, the destined empress of the world, about to place her diadem on the brow of the peerless knight who has dared to snatch her from the clutches of papacy! By the mass! Those circling walls with their towers and spires seem to float in the air like one vast crown of beaten gold!"

"Is not yonder the tomb of William the Norman?" growled the grim champion at his side, pointing to a remote and solitary ruin.

"It is as you say, Canaletto," replied the Lombard. "But what troop of knights is that approaching the gates, and what is it all, that is stirring around the great tower of Abdurrhman?"

"I see what appears to me like a great procession and a banner with the Broken Loaf!"

"The Frangipani, staunch upholders of the dynasty. But here come wayfarers of another kind — mark you their zeal? They travel with speed!"

Two personages, one of whom wore the mitre and robes of a bishop, appeared mounted on mules, followed

at some distance by a company of knights, whose rich armour continually flashed in the setting sun.

"By my faith, it is the Cardinal of Trapani, and with him Guido of Suzzara, the Protonotary of Bari," said Canaletto. "They scent a vintage as far as a carrion."

The Visconti broke into a merry laugh, but before he could reply, the personages thus described were so near that their appearance could be more closely scrutinized. The Protonotary of Bari was a man of about fifty, lean and shrivelled; his face was generally cast down in assumed humility, but when raised it so closely resembled that of a red fox, in the sharp, cunning features, in the peculiar glitter of the eye, that few beheld it without making the comparison. The other was a fat and bulky man, whose large, dull German visage was, as it were, oiled all over with self-complacency and stolidity, and contrasted curiously with the acute physiognomy of his companion. This was the Cardinal of Trapani, an active partisan of the late emperor, by whose appointment he had held the office ever since.

"Corpo di Bacco!" exclaimed the foxen-visaged dignitary, "yonder rides the Duke of Altamura!" And, switching his mule, he endeavoured to increase his speed.

"It cannot be — without befitting attendants," remonstrated the other, "and in advance of a motley crowd of lousy pilgrims!"

"Nay, but it is!" snarled the protonotary. "There is not another man on the island with a bearing like his."

"It does not become your exalted lordship to trot," expostulated the dignitary from Trapani, somewhat out of breath and noting his companion's vigorous efforts to push on.

"It becomes every man, every prudent man, at least, to trot, when he knows himself observed," returned the

other, and, continuing in the pace he had fallen into, he drew his unwitting companion after him, and they were soon lost to sight among the dense crowds pressing toward the city.

"There are banners of the Cenci, the Conti, the Salviati, Savelli, Massimi — why, this city must be well-nigh choked with this foreign multitude!" Canaletto remarked, as they slowly pushed on.

"Some may find lodgings in the old ruins in the valley," Ottorino replied. "Fear not, noble Canaletto, in this city, where even the fountains flow wine, you will not be cheated out of your heritage!"

"I like not wolves of too many colours in one den. Have the Orsini and Savelli locked claws?"

"Will the bear sup with the wolf? The Orsini are fortifying their Roman lairs."

"With a Colonna as prospective pontiff I reprove not their haste," Canaletto laughed hoarsely. Then the Lombard cavalcade pushed slowly on toward the gates of the city.

It was a gorgeous and imposing spectacle which now greeted the gaze of the leaders. Extended before them lay the shimmering bay of Palermo, crowded with gilded galleys, whose richly decorated prows, variegated standards, and pictured keels were magnificently relieved by the burnished gold of the waves, while the triumphal arch, through which the embassies from Italy had entered upon Sicilian soil, rose majestically over the landing. The setting sun shed a purple glow over La Zisa, the Arabian palace of William the First. The leaves of the lofty palm-trees, which shaded the structure, hung motionless in the still, translucent evening air. In the distance the Oreto, like a golden serpent, slipped sinuously

toward the sea. So beautiful and lofty was the scene that Ottorino could not refrain from exclaiming:

"Truly this is Italy, the land of magic! It is not only a land to live for—it is a land to die for!"

"An art we all acquire at the first trial," replied a sonorous voice, not devoid of hidden mockery, close at the Lombard's side. The latter turned quickly, and saw the dark form of a horseman, who had noiselessly approached over the velvety turf, having wheeled his coal-black charger as if to join the Lombard contingent.

It needed not the silver keys of St. Peter surmounted by a silver hawk with outstretched wings, emblem of Ferrando, Duke of Altamura, to inform the Visconti of the quality of the newcomer. The high constable of the kingdom of Sicily was a man in the prime of life, of good stature, somewhat spare, with sharply defined, but handsome Italian features. His eyebrows had an habitual curve downward, as if accustomed to brooding thoughtfulness, and the mouth in repose had an expression of singular cynicism. But when this repose was broken, eyes and features lighted up with a satirical brilliancy, and dark portent lurked behind the smile of the finely chiseled lips.

In his lugubrious dress of black velvet, ornamented only with a chain of massive gold beads, with a black feather drooping from the broad Spanish hat which shaded his features, the duke's appearance was more remarked than if he had been apparelled in the gayest finery.

"Have I really the happiness of meeting a scion of the noble house of Visconti?" the duke exclaimed, after a lightning glance at the Golden Viper. Then extending his hand in friendly greeting, he continued: "An ad-

mirer, as I casually overheard, of all that is beautiful in our sunny plains?"

The young Lombard shrank unconsciously from the ready recognition, which he had neither anticipated nor at this moment desired, but not to be found devoid in politeness, he grasped the proffered hand.

"If I obtain no other reward for my journey across the Apennines, the recognition of the illustrious Duke of Altamura would prove recompense sufficient," he replied, with a courteous bend of the head.

"What are the latest tidings from the North?" the duke continued, reining in his charger and continuing slowly by the side of the Lombard. "I wager they scent the wind from Viterbo even in the valley of the Po."

"It were more fit for us, who have spent some tedious weeks on our south-bound journey, to make inquiry of you."

The duke smiled, and a strange light flashed in his eyes.

"But how chances it that the Golden Viper creeps toward the Sun-soaring Eagle?"

The Lombard bit his lips.

"Since all Italy is making her peace with Rome, I see not why we of Lombardy should be so unchristian, not to say mad, as to alone withhold ourselves."

"It is one thing to carry your sins to Rome — another to bring them to Palermo," the duke replied, with a smile. "There is room for all the world at Rome and the devil to boot."

"Not to mention the saints."

"Not to mention below," said the duke, pointing downward with a most expressive gesture. "For if Rome should sink with the weight of her saints, they would

make room down there. They are very polite people in the pit, as by right they should be, being chiefly courtiers and great personages who have left their names in chronicles, great folk who would be knocking their heads against the stars had they never died. Truly Italy has awakened from her stupor — did they all dream the same dream, or did one fool make many?"

He paused for a moment, regarding the Lombard with a musing smile, then he continued: "Yet — welcome the effort, even if it hath a Miserere before it. The unity of Italy is a raving maniac's dream. Your Northern princes know not the Southern temper, and your ultramontane fantastics cannot shape Italian destinies. You are bound for Palermo on secret mission of the imperial viceroy — nay, do not start, no true son of Italy ventures forth without a hidden clause under his belt. We welcome the alliance of Lombardy, and to you, Matteo Visconti's kinsman and envoy, do we pledge ourselves to further it as best we may."

"Then I thank you in my own name and that of my noble kinsman," Ottorino exclaimed, joyously. "The great project, which brings all true Ghibellines to Palermo, cannot know defeat with such a puissant advocate of its cause. Can we but carry the election at Viterbo, the Sicilian kingdom will rest as on a rock."

"The Conclave is divided, and some of the cardinals do not hold that poverty is essential to sanctity — yet they are not immortal. They who live will see!"

At this moment the sound of a trumpet was heard near at hand, and was immediately answered by one more remote. Suddenly a body of horsemen in bright armour, with spears set in rest and banners streaming, emerged from the groves of the Conca d'Oro. The spare, but tall and sinewy figures, the pennon of the falcon, the buff

armour, the prodigiously long spears, round shields and crossbows, the vast mustachios and beards, the small fiery steeds, the red ruffs around the necks, the numerous leaden lambs-of-god, with which the breasts of the riders were studded, marked the troop to be Spanish or rather Catalan, for the distinctions at that period were most jealously guarded.

The leader of the party seemed to be a horseman who, having separated himself from the ranks, came riding at a slow and equal pace toward the cavalcade, giving its leaders ample leisure to form a correct idea of his personnel. He was of middle stature and of spare frame, though so muscularly powerful and war-worn that the flesh seemed as tough as leather. The features were lean and haggard, and mingled with something of the Arab. This was seen in the hard-cut nostrils, thick lips, olive complexion, and coarse hair, thick and wiry as that of a bull. The eye had nothing of the mistrust and melancholy thought of the Italian, but it was reserved, stern, and, so to speak, stonily determined. He was armed at all points in dull iron plate, with the exception of the head, on which was a steel cap, worn in place of the weighty helmet, which he carried on the pommel of his high saddle.

Ottorino's startled gaze rested upon the gaunt iron figure before him, and either from some indefinable suspicion which entered his mind, or from some recollection, he knew that he beheld the man who was believed to be the instrument of the duke's unbridled and relentless ambition, — a man at once a bloody soldier of fortune and a crafty assassin.

Don Miguel Crivello, the leader of the Catalans, had hardly espied the duke, when, abasing his lance with an appearance of deference, he approached the Lombard

contingent, surveying it with singularly fixed attention. The Duke of Altamura spurred his horse slightly forward and gave a haughty wave of his hand as the Catalan drew rein.

"By the beard of Santiago, my lord," he exclaimed, "I did not look for you in this company."

"Ay, indeed, and why not?" replied the duke. "These gentlemen from the blue lakes of Lombardy are our guests — tell your cutthroats to clear the path."

At a signal from their leader the Catalans drew up to one side. The duke, after expressing his regret to the Visconti for having to dispense for the nonce with the society of one so high in his esteem, set his horse in motion, and, falling behind with Crivello, was soon lost to sight.

"Ill betide me," Canaletto muttered to Ottorino, after Altamura and his henchman had disappeared, "or some mischief is intended by the duke and his varlet. If there is one species of wickedness this Ferrando has not committed, by San Ambrogio, I know not what name he gives it in the confessional."

"But the Catalan — did you see with what strange looks he regarded us?"

"He should have been smothered at his birth," Canaletto growled between his set teeth. "There is something in the air that tells me we must be on our guard."

"What have we to do with the duke's affairs? We came not to solicit a benefice either from him or his patron saint, if he has one!"

"The intercession of the calendar were not too many. He who sups with the devil must needs have a long spoon."

A merry laugh was Ottorino's reply, and for some time they continued their passage in silence. They made

but slow headway against the ever-varying multitude, which blocked the approach to the Porta Nuova. Here were assembled cardinals in their scarlet robes and purple mantles, barons and knights of the empire, in glittering armour and flaunting livery, prelates in sacerdotal pomp, domestics, pages, footmen, or staffieri, in gorgeous attire; nobles, attended each by his mass of armed retainers; envoys from foreign courts, displaying their respective emblems, each surrounded by his glittering retinue, vying with each other in prodigality of decoration, velveteed, jewelled, embroidered, and plumed embassies from Italy, each headed by its gonfalonier, bearing a rich flag ornamented with some crest or device — and mingling with all these gorgeous trains, flooding the valley, crowning the olive-clad heights, massed upon all ascents, whence the most distant view could be obtained, were grouped gazers innumerable, pilgrims and travellers from every land of the known world, in every garb, and speaking as many languages as at the confusion of Babel. Trumpets and drums resounded in every direction, and over the whole animated and dazzlingly beautiful spectacle shone the sky of a Southern Italian twilight, like a dome of pallid gold, adorned with all the hues of the rainbow.

In order to avoid a rush at the Porta Nuova and the turmoil and confusion inevitably arising from the simultaneous arrival of so many embassies, differing in nationality, rank, and number, Antonio Pedretti, the royal master of ceremonies, had filled the gateway with his portly presence, and was watching with intense anxiety for the precise moment when the cavalcades would disentangle themselves from the mass of humanity which pressed upon their heels and impeded their advance. A shout arose from the multitudes gathered on the heights and

walls when the Duke of Altamura emerged from the crowds, — a shout which shook once more the shores of the Conca d'Oro, which had so often echoed to the welcome of conquerors. As the most powerful vassal of the Sicilian kingdom appeared under the arches of the Porta Nuova, the master of ceremonies delivered a brief Latin harangue, expressing his satisfaction at the happy ending of years fraught with strife and bloodshed. The duke listened with bared head, bending in assumed humility over his steed, whose snorts frequently disturbed the harangue. When at last he recovered himself and turned aside, his lips writhed with an ill-suppressed smile of derision, but he was relieved from further observation by Antonio Pedretti, who, raising his wand of office, gave the signal to the envoys crowding the gateway to advance in line of procession. Instantly the whole diplomatic corps was in motion, hurrying and struggling for precedence. In vain the master of ceremonies attempted to bring order, by shouting to each one, as well as he could, his proper station in the advance. The envoy of the Palatinate, a burly and gruff noble, representing the seven electors of the empire, with his retinue of young German knights, pushed forward so vigorously that he arrived almost abreast of the ambassador of Alexius Comnenus, the Greek emperor, who, by prescription, had precedence of all, being moreover highly favoured at the court of Palermo. Great confusion followed this untoward event, the rest of the envoys pushing forward with such eagerness that the Duke of Altamura, who witnessed the entanglement, laughed and exclaimed:

“Signori, at this rate you will knock off each other’s spurs.”

“None shall touch mine till he hath first knocked off

my head, signor," exclaimed the representative of Aragon, furiously.

"Spaniards and Aragonese never boast," remarked the envoy from Hungary, curling his lips in derision. He was a splendid cavalier, and bestrode his steed with knightly grace, eying the stiff Iberian with evident disdain, while the Byzantine and Teutonic contingents defiled through the gate.

Aragon and Castile were suffered to pass unchallenged by those pushing upon their heels. They were closely followed by the Lombard cavalcade of Ottorino and his warlike companions. Having yielded precedence to the representatives of these three formidable powers, the other envoys of the Ghibelline confederation now pushed fiercely on, obstinately refusing to yield to each other. In vain did the master of ceremonies cite countless authorities in matters of precedence; his voice, though loud and shrill, was stifled by the uproar. Swords flashed in the purple dusk, and the envoys of Bologna and Ferrara were at sharp and angry parley. The multitudes from the different provinces, grouped on every place of eminence, caught the spirit of the contest, and their tumultuous cries and gestures seemed to prelude an imminent outbreak of strife.

"The Signoria is the oldest friend of the dynasty," shouted a pompous Venetian, "and as such —"

"We represent the king's most tried and loyal allies," remonstrated the envoy from Genoa, "and as such —"

"Venice yields precedence to none but the empire."

"We are first as the emperor's most faithful vassals," shrieked a cavalier under the banner of Pisa, who headed his company of men-at-arms with a broadaxe in his hand, the edge of which he turned over his mighty shoulder.

The Duke of Altamura at this juncture commenced a policy of reconciliation, perceiving the inability of the master of ceremonies to quell the disturbance. As he appeared on his coal-black charger under the massive gate, his person became distinctly visible to the immense multitudes, and the sinister gloom of his habiliments produced a singular effect. Some faint attempts at a shout were audible; these died away in indistinct, awe-struck mutters, were renewed, then passed into utter silence.

"I will ride between you and the envoy from Genoa," said the duke, turning to the Venetian during the first lull in the uproar. "As first peer of the kingdom I may surely be allowed this day to choose my own company."

"Now by the Lion of San Marco, I will not yield to Genoa nor the whole maritime fraternity combined," replied the Venetian, suiting his action to his speech and dashing forward, without heeding the duke.

"San Ambrogio to the rescue!" shouted a dark, slightly hunchbacked knight, with grim, forbidding features, urging his steed with headlong violence through the crowd, while he fiercely beckoned his followers onward.

"Lanciotto Malatesta!" exclaimed the Venetian, drawing rein. "Nay, the odds are too much against us, but, Signor Pedretti, take notice that I herewith withdraw myself from the procession, because I am not allowed my proper place in it."

"Your proper place, magnificent signor," stammered the master of ceremonies.

"By San Marco! Is it at the tail of the men who cannot face us on the seas?" returned the frowning noble. "Here is my gauntlet against the best of you that denies the right to the Winged Lion to march before

all but the Imperial Eagles. Defiance to Genoa — defiance to Pisa ! ”

Many a hand was instantly on the lance, many a steed received a golden spur, when the aged Cardinal of Messina urged his mule between the enraged contestants.

“ Know ye not, bold signori,” he exclaimed, “ that we journey to a peaceful triumph, and that in this holy season of Christian love and fellowship, which we have assembled to celebrate, it behooves none to wield brand or dagger ? ”

There was at once a lull of submission. Lances sank, steeds were checked, and order restored. Slowly through the vaulted gateway the procession moved into the city, and though the hues of twilight fell purple upon the multitudes, the splendour of the effect, as they entered, could hardly be surpassed. Helmets and mitres flashed, plumes soared, banners streamed, lances sparkled, a rainbow effulgence of colour glowed along the rich groups in their superb liveries. All the discordant peals of military music, softened amid the general tramp and murmur, were harmonized into one gorgeous triumphal melody. A poet might have imagined that he was gazing on an antique Roman spectacle, when conquerors returned with the spoils of nations. The splendour of the show produced its effect on the vast mob that worshipped the hero, in whose honour and glory the cities of Italy had sent to Palermo their most splendid embassies, and when the procession reached the Kassaro, the principal thoroughfare, which had still retained its Arabian name, the shouts of welcome seemed to shake the very foundations of the city. The bells of all the churches burst into simultaneous peals, and kept up their stirring melody during the entire advance of the cavalcades from the region of the Porta Nuova to the Piazza del Duomo.

At the same time immense bonfires were kindled on the adjacent hilltops, and vast pyramids of fire ascended above the cypress-trees. The evening twilight, reddening with the reflection of the fires, added new and striking hues to the procession as it passed up the Via Porto Castro, beneath the curious old tower of San Nicolo, and by the ancient convent of San Salvatore, which had been founded in A. D. 1072 by Robert Guiscard. Thence the multitudes turned into the Via del Pronotaro, the palaces on each side of which were hung with costly ornaments, tapestries, garlands, and banners, inscribed with glorifying inscriptions. In this district lay the chief strength of the city, the great squares being environed by the palaces of the chief barons, while the adjoining streets were inhabited only by their clients and retainers.

The column headed by Ottorino Visconti had reached the dark square extending between the fortresslike palaces of the rival factions, Geracci and Corvaja, when the entire procession came to a precipitate halt. For, stretching across the piazza before the church of Santa Maria Catena, were drawn up as in order of battle the serried iron ranks of the Suabian knights, headed by Landulf of Trent, representing in his person the interests of the youth Conradino, son of Emperor Conrad IV., and successor upon his maturity to the imperial crown of the Holy Roman empire. Marvelling at a delay which was likely to increase the confusion of the armed masses, Ottorino glanced around for Signor Pedretti, when his gaze met the sombre form of the Duke of Altamura suddenly emerging in the foreground. There was a glitter of fierceness in his eyes as he inquired into the cause of the delay, which so affrighted the soldier to whom he spoke that he could not reply. But Count Landulf of Trent, slowly approaching, informed the duke,

with a countenance by no means so full of regret as were his words, that his Germans had refused to lower their standards before that of the Saracens, to whom had been entrusted the defences of the city, and had set up their own flag on the ramparts, claiming the removal of their ensign might be construed as a mark of homage to the infidels, a thing which the German spirit would never permit or endure. On the other hand, Sidi Yussuff's Saracens refused to make room for those northern barbarians, as they contemptuously styled the Suabian knights. Their leader informed the duke, with a smile of dull malice, that he awaited his decision, knowing that by this act he had increased the dilemma in which the high constable of the kingdom found himself. And a dilemma it was, which did not escape the duke's penetration, for it seemed that he must either suffer an insult to be offered to the imperial standards before the gaze of all Christendom, offend the chosen allies of the king, or exhibit his own weakness in a vain attempt at compelling a submission, which the high-strung Germans were not likely to yield.

A moment's musing, however, showed the duke not only both horns of the alternative, but suggested to him an escape which even allowed him to reap an advantage from the situation. He turned to an archer of the Calabrian guard.

"Inform Don Crivello and his Catalans, stationed beyond the bridge of King Roger, to meet me at once with their standards flying, and to occupy the walls of the city." After the archer had sped upon his errand, the duke turned to the Saracen leader. "You, Sidi Yussuff, withdraw your companies to the Piazza Martorama, but let none pass your ranks. If afterward the Germans assail you, help yourselves as best you can."

The fierce flash of the duke's eyes fell upon the discomfited features of the Teuton, but so rueful was his countenance, that the duke laughed aloud. In this laughter the whole mass of spectators joined, for, by his ruse, the duke had placed his own men upon the defences of the city, depriving Suabians and Saracens alike of their important trust.

Count Landulf tarried irresolutely; he glanced at the Sicilians and Apulians, — they, too, were laughing; he glanced at his own men-at-arms, — they sat demurely on their large steeds; then he also laughed.

But the sound of his laughter suddenly stilled that of the assemblage.

Something he probably meant to say, perhaps to do, which would have sorely compromised the newly restored peace between Church and State, when the attention of every one was suddenly caught and absorbed in a report not unlike the outbreak of a volcano. The whole area in the background surrounding the gloomy pile of the Torre del Diavolo appeared as if disgorging a sea of flames, which seemed to flow over the walls in streams of crimson fire. The first thought which entered the mind of the duke was that some dissatisfied soldiery had set fire to the old tower, but his alarm in an instant turned to wonder when the seeming overflow curled up its torrents, rushing almost to the skies, and formed a pyramid of fire, the base of which was as broad as the immense tower from which it rose. The pyramid seemed then to rise in the air until, by some wondrous and as it seemed magical device, its base rounded, hollowed, and changed into a crown of laurels of the purest flame. Beneath the extraordinary effulgence of this illumination, the piazza, palace, clock-tower, and the great mosque of Abdurrhahman changed to crimson their purple garb of dusk. But

the wonders in store exceeded these. A black cloud suddenly rushed over the battlements, and sounds as of a wild tempest were heard, with gleams of jagged lightning darting through its dense vapours. The cloud gradually grew thinner and brighter in its centre, until, as if behind a veil, the figure of a woman appeared, of perfect symmetry of outline, but with averted face. She wore a black robe, girded at the waist, with what appeared in the distance a silver serpent, and seemed engaged in some mysterious ceremony, waving overhead the drooping branch of a willow-tree.

"In Our Lady's name,—what may this be?" exclaimed Landulf of Trent, crossing himself repeatedly and turning to his silent Germans.

"Surely this is not the work of the sorceress of the tower?" replied aghast a man-at-arms standing near the German leaders.

"Sorceress? What sorceress, idiot?" exclaimed the duke, fiercely, turning upon the soldier, whose remark he had overheard.

"The nun who is imprisoned there, who was abducted from holy convent, your Grace," answered the latter, confusedly.

"A crown and laurels and Francesca!" muttered the duke, as if he had not heard the man-at-arm's speech in his absorption.

The populace, not understanding the drift of the flaming allegory, applauded it with a terrific shout. The duke, as if fired with a gorgeous vision which filled his imagination, bent to the people with the majesty of an emperor receiving his crown. But almost at the same instant his flushed countenance grew pale, his teeth became clenched, and his eyes stared wildly and fixedly forward.

The pressure of the crowds struggling to accompany the now advancing procession had almost separated Ottorino from the company of Altamura. The duke had volunteered to escort the Lombard embassy to the Moorish palace of Khalesa, which by orders of the king had been placed at their disposal. When the quaint old relic of the Arab dominion over Sicily at last appeared, innumerable attendants were spied ready and waiting to administer to the comforts of Ottorino and his company. With a smile, the young Visconti turned to his grim subordinate, who had been unusually silent since they had entered the city, and, justly attributing his sullen demeanour to a longing for the vintage of his native Lombardy, he said:

“Cheer up, Canaletto! We now enter the Mahometan paradise, into which not even the black camel death may cast its shadow.”

“I love a smart saying, but better a full cup!” growled that worthy, smacking his tongue. “Lead me to a cloister, well stocked, all day to sing, all night to drink, — I care not for your fool’s paradise.”

“Patience, blasphemer! Thou shalt soon be the most immortal drunkard on this island, and the devil bid for thy society against the saints!”

“I care not how soon! The Moorish custom is to begin by washing the stranger’s feet. Canaletto’s custom is to begin by washing his throat. The individual vanishes before the cause, as my old master observed when he drank the Capuchin under the table! Ay, and if the vintage find favour in mine eyes, I will with these three fingers pluck three hairs from the beard of the Sultan of Damascus, — by the mass, I have sworn it.”

“An heroic resolve,” returned Ottorino, “but meanwhile beware, lest the Sicilian women rob thee of thy

capillary quills ere thou startest on thy pilgrimage to the great Sultan."

The cavalcade had now arrived at the gates of the Moorish palace, behind which lay the fragrant gardens, hidden from view by a stone wall of the height of half-grown palms. At slow pace the Lombards passed under the archway adorned with Kufic inscriptions, and were soon lost to sight in the shades of this Mahometan Buen Retiro.

CHAPTER II.

LORD AND FOLLOWER

THE moon had risen high in the heavens, and Palermo lay sleeping in the stillness of the southern night.

High up on one of the hills just outside the town a succession of precipices rose. These were connected at one point by a narrow bridge, half-hidden in the deep shadows of the overhanging shrubbery. Far below the cataract thundered, its white foam scarcely visible, so great was the depth of the chasm.

Suddenly a man closely muffled emerged from the darkness of the shrubbery, and, pausing on the crest of the steep incline, surveyed with calm attention the scene before him. The waters rushed in one vast body over the highest pile of rocks, and fell headlong on to another, where they were separated into a hundred different torrents. These torrents lashed themselves into furies of foam, and flung themselves downward, leaping from one precipice to another. Above towered the dark masses of Monte Pellegrino, and below lay the beautiful valley of the Conca d'Oro, with Palermo in its midst.

After watching the wild beauty of the scene for awhile, the Duke of Altamura walked toward the bridge, imitating most accurately as he went the mournful cry of the screech-owl.

"'Tis a grim height," the duke said to himself, paus-

ing as if to calculate the possibilities of a jump below, "no ill place, forsooth, to be alone with one's enemy. 'Tis so easy to slip accidentally."

"I was just considering, your Grace, that even with all the advantages of suddenness and treachery such sport might be dangerous," replied a dark figure, which stepped from behind a tree.

"Ah! 'tis you, Crivello!" exclaimed the duke, eying the newcomer with distrust. "Why glare you so stealthily? I know — you are my friend."

"I mean to be, signor!" replied Crivello, calmly. "But shall I tamely lose the recompense of all my toils in pursuance of your timorous policy?"

"Timorous?" returned the duke, fiercely. "You are of that metal which persistently spoils with your ruffianly brawls the triumphs of diplomacy. The Duke of Altamura bides his time!"

"But if this proposed union of the Ghibellines be accomplished, what is your future kingdom but a name without a span of land? What is my promised dukedom but a trumpet full of alarums without a substance?"

"Your suppositions fall as thick and fast as hail," replied the duke. "But remember, though prophecies may mock, fate shall not!"

A wild light shone in his brilliant eyes as he continued:

"Could I but see again that withered old wizard of Padua, that half-madman, half-sage, who was wont to assist me when but a visionary schoolboy I studied the black arts, the while our long-bearded master imagined that I was buried in the dust of St. Augustine and St. Jerome."

"He did show you a vision, as the rumour goes, in a mirror, formed of one vast amethyst," replied Crivello,

in a tone slightly dubious, "at least, so it is vulgarly reported in Italy; also, that the skilful graybeard was the devil himself."

"Did you go to school there yourself, that your memory so readily retains the facts? And what prattles the mob concerning the vision which the wizard showed me by his felonious art?"

"A skeleton with a crown upon his eyeless skull, wrapped in the mantle of royalty, and offering his sceptre to your kneeling form."

"It is false, by San Gennaro, it is false, and whoever says 'tis true I will have boiled in a caldron of oil!" exclaimed the duke, with fierce vivacity. "It was a shadow wearing the imperial crown and mantle of Charlemagne, and looking as we behold his effigy in the monkish chronicles. It offered me his sceptre and sword, twisted together with the likeness of a serpent."

"Your Grace has read the lesson well," replied the Catalan, "and I know that you think your master has taught you, his favourite pupil, all his tricks. Yet beware that he has not reserved one which may fail you at the last."

"I will make good my dream despite your raven's croaking," said the duke, with a smile, in which lurked a dark underthought.

Crivello made no reply beyond raising his feathered cap half-ironically. As he did so a great mass of light, suddenly flashing from behind the craggy side of the rocks, revealed a singular scene below.

Along the bed of the stream moved a procession of monks, carrying a bier illumined by numberless torches. Their monotonous chant broke for a brief space of time the intense stillness. Then the echoes died softly away

and the procession disappeared behind the lower ledges of the rocks.

The duke and Crivello had watched intently the singular spectacle, the solemnity of which, however, appealed but little to their present mood, for the duke turned suddenly to his follower:

"Marked you nothing extraordinary, — nothing baffling human ken about the walls of our tower at sunset?"

Crivello nodded assent.

"It is even so! My own eyes have witnessed what reason rebels to accept."

"Francesca affects, indeed, to use the offices of Moors and Turkish slaves, but there are some who report they saw strange, grisly forms of brightness and darkness mingled, which flew about obeying her behest!"

"Ay! The vulgar deem everything great which lies beyond the pale of their understanding, measuring it by their own base incapacities," Crivello replied, contemptuously.

"But if she has discovered secrets, what then? Was not Pope Sylvester II. a potent magician? Yea, and Benedict IX., and Gregory VII.? But, Crivello, seeing how well I managed my affairs on the mainland, deem you that I need the sleeve of Hildebrand, from which he shook thunder and lightning, or the flute of Benedict, with which he enchanted women to follow him over hill and dale? And as for our bird in the torre — at last then Francesca's lofty spirit bows down before me like flame before the magician's wand."

"God's life, signor — what hope can she have remaining but from your Grace's favour?" exclaimed the Catalan.

"Yes, and she loves me," said the duke, with a scornful smile, adding, in a darker tone: "And she alone per-

haps of all the women who have ever told me so! Surely, Crivello, I am a deep Platonic, seeking as I perpetually do the ideal of beauty, and finding only disappointment in all its forms."

"Signor, in my opinion, for I am not versed in the pedagogue's litany, Donna Francesca approaches the nearest to the perfection of all loveliness," said the Catalan, starting to observe that his superior suddenly paused, as if he had seen a snake in his path.

"Why — you repeat but a common tale, Crivello," the duke replied, rapidly pacing up and down. "Is she not as famous throughout Italy as Helen was in Greece? Ay, and more than famous, for men's blame spreads wider than their praise — you know, Crivello. Else how chances it that all your deeds of arms are outblazoned by deeds of guile, for you are called a cutthroat much oftener than a soldier. But our absence has encouraged Francesca in her pranks, — what is she doing now?"

Crivello shrugged his shoulders.

"That you should rather ask the sage, who can look into the future and behind doors, locked and barred, a gift my poor eyes do not possess. But if I may venture a surmise, she is most likely practising some dark incantation in a tomb, perchance some love-spells, to lure you back to the old worship."

"Then I shall begin to deem her possessed of a science beyond the common skill in the black herbs of death. And yet I feel as if my ancient love were rekindling from its ashes in my heart. Methinks I loved her once before I loved ambition. But saw you never a black wizard in her company, a wizard whose skill mocks hers to clouds and vapours, one Dom 'Alamo, of whom I spoke to you?"

Crivello made a negative gesture.

"Signór, no — I have not seen him."

The duke nodded musingly; then he suddenly turned with an expression of fierce scrutiny on his captain.

"I think you often strangely mistake my humour, Crivello, or, wherefore think you that I am animated by so persevering and exterminating a hatred of the suitors for the hand of our fair kinswoman, the lady of Miraval?"

"Why? Because — the evil fiend may strike me if I know — unless it be that your Grace deems all unworthy of your future greatness," replied Crivello, shuddering beneath the serpent eyes, which by their spell held his own.

"Partly so," replied the duke, in a gratified tone, "but also because this same sorcerer, this same Dom Alamo, who showed to me my imperial fortune, at the same time raised for me a phantom, crowned with a diadem, whose glory even outglared the lustre of Charlemagne. And think you that I will suffer, if I can prevent it, the wreath, which I must acquire with toils and care so mighty, to pass into the hands of one whose power by this marriage will counterbalance my own? For he who possesses her incomparable beauty and her love would snatch heaven from the gods and usurp their throne in his maddening bliss."

"It were hardly rational to expect your Grace's consent thereto," replied the Catalan. "But I do indeed marvel at the persistency of those who remark not one returning claw-print in the sand."

"Who can give reasons for a woman's doings?" replied the duke, with dark significance. "Let rumour have her sway, let the mob believe the very worst, there may be still deeper policy in it. These accidents dazzle the aim of suspicion."

“Ay — but the remission?”

A scornful laugh broke from the lips of the duke.

“The chair of St. Peter was at first of very plain wood. Another Arnold of Brescia might be found who would strip the Church as naked as she was born, and turn her out of Constantine’s doors as meek and ragged, as holy and beggared, as she entered them. So great a service might win Heaven’s pardon for many little malefactions, and, besides, ’tis in my thought some day to redeem the holy sepulchre from the infidels. I tell you, Crivello, I have had ill offices done me by his late Holiness, and who can look into the future? The cardinals banter and procrastinate and parade their jealousies before the eyes of Christendom. But no more of this. The hour will fetch the man. We have matters closer at hand. These sudden deaths are suspected, and the herbs are getting scarce. We must find our two apothecaries. Their trade is brisk and they ought to be monstrously rich.”

“They are so much so that they would have been murdered long ago if they were not witches.”

“You will seek them out at once. We may have need of their art. But meanwhile I want some stout knaves to strike with the open steel, so that the blame may fall on some grizzly outlaw. Know you some such?”

“Signor, the Cardinal of Sienna has issued a decree of banishment to all banditti in the states of the Church.”

“Why, so the consistory that was has issued a decree of deposition ’gainst all the usurpers in the peninsula,” returned the duke. “But, noble captain, it is by no means essential that the bravi must be from consecrated territory; besides, where did you find the men who met old Gravina at the convent of the Franciscan friars?”

“The bungling villains! They gave him a dozen wounds and not one mortal, leaving it for a poor gentle-

man of your Grace's to strangle him in his bed after all," said the Catalan, grumbling.

"That reminds me — are you certain that yonder fool of the ceremonies did not note you on that occasion? He is the very ass to listen to a message of state compliment, and was it not with some such folly you gained admittance to the boaster's bed of sickness? I do often mark some strange significance in his eyes."

"If I thought so —" said Crivello, with a short and most emphatic gesture. "But as I persuaded him I came from his late Holiness to bring him absolution from his sins, he would as lief have misdoubted the archangel Gabriel coming direct from heaven and beating the air with his white and golden wings."

"You rave, Crivello, or else you are mad," exclaimed the duke, with a derisive smile.

"Nay, signor, I was but remembering the scene of the annunciation in the church of the hermits on Monte Aventino," replied the captain, with a low deference.

"And you remember it to good purpose, for soon you shall wander again amidst its leafy wilderness — not to meditate upon the former greatness of the city, nor to weep over the mighty that have fallen, but upon a mission much suited to your tastes. How many wounds did you say? It would have made his mother weep had she not gone before him — before the fox stole into her hen-roost. But he, who boasted that he would win our fair kinswoman, even if all the demons of hell stood between him and his happiness — he, who boasted that he would love her so that she would perforce learn to love him — why stare you so, Crivello? Know you not that there is a love spiritual, a reflection of the flame burning in our soul; a love without that material earthiness — but what were we discussing? He possessed a strong fancy

and a glowing imagination, that boy with the shadow of a crown encircling his fair head; he would rave at her beauty till men were faint with rage to hear him prate. And yet I say he died not ill in the flush of youth, that tramontane lover of our Helena, and he went to his grave in the full belief that she connived at his death."

"And it should have chilled the fire of my lady's adorers, this sudden and mysterious end of that love-enwrapped seraph," said Crivello, with a disgusting smile.

"They are stark mad," exclaimed the duke, "else would they think that the Duke of Altamura, rejecting an emperor's offspring, would cast his kinswoman into the arms of the first beggarly minstrel who whines his love-ditty under her bower? But," he continued, after a brief pause, "who is sane? A few starving labourers, perhaps, toiling after their plough, and not puzzling their brains over the carcasses of their fellow men. But we have strayed from our subject, the banditti. They are not so completely banished from these regions as you would have me think, Crivello. I wager that you do not relinquish your old associates without knowing where you might rejoin them."

"Your pardon, noble signor, I am in your Grace's service, but I must refuse acknowledging such humiliating company," said Crivello, with an offended air.

"It is my turn to ask your pardon, most noble cut-throat and knight of the gallows, for confounding you with your betters," replied the duke, with an ironical bow. "And now you will perhaps condescend to vouchsafe us some information regarding those knights of the mace and the highway, who fight for honour, but never for pay?"

Crivello bit his lower lip.

"Perchance it may be that Scrivezzo still lingers in some of his old haunts," he then replied, reluctantly, wincing under the scrutinizing eye of the duke.

"I'll warrant then he has as many worthy coadjutors at his beck as would set all Rome and Sicily in blaze."

"More than enough to plunder the whole city at night," replied the Catalan, with a sudden kindling of enthusiasm.

"Ha! Would not his Eminence of Sienna rave could he hear you now? But what manner of policy would it be to kill the hen that lays the golden egg? I would but know on whom I can depend, in case the worst should befall. Some there are who have done me marvellously ill offices with the late Holy Father, and whispered strange tales into the old man's ears—strange tales, Crivello! It is well that old people will die."

"Scrivezzo might perhaps be discovered by a good pair of eyes in Palermo, for he cannot read, and the edict is posted in Latin," remarked Crivello, with increasing interest.

"It suffices if we know where to find him in time of need," replied the duke, thoughtfully. "A tumult raised by them were dangerous. Yet, since at some day we intend to take up our residence in the Eternal City, the cardinals, in view of these constant and unceasing brawls, surely cannot fail to see the necessity of our forces occupying the chief points of interest—just to become acquainted with their history. And all the points of strength save the tomb of Hadrian are now in possession of the German knights of the new senator, good and faithful men, 'tis true, but perhaps not so devoted as it would appear. These matters crave our earnest attention, Crivello, although I have others of even more

instant urgency. 'Tis a pity you have no scholarship, else you might read the list furnished me by his hunch-backed Grace of Alife. You might then see the names and hiding-places of the captains of all the black bands in Italy, who will for remission of their sins brave the very devil in his lair!"

"What would such knowledge benefit me, noble signor?" said Crivello, somewhat surprised.

"Nay, it would only benefit me, who shall, as it is, be compelled to read you the names," remarked the duke, carelessly. "For I would have you use your own discretion to understand how these religious freebooters stand affected toward me, whether they would prefer to join the standards of the Church to receive absolution, or mine to receive pay."

"I know not, signor, that they would believe me if I offered more than they already drain out of the lords who employ them," said the captain, dubiously eying his chief.

"But if these lords were all gone, and the best of us will die some day, would they not need a new master? And would it not be wise to be first in the field?" questioned the duke. "Moreover — can you not sing them some fine song of ducal bonnets and princes' feathers, of golden spurs and Spanish castles, especially to the Germans, who without some exterior distinction hold themselves cheated out of their birthright?"

"Would your Grace then have me tamper even with the retainers of the Church?" said Crivello, following at a slower and more reluctant step the swift movements of his superior.

"Would your captainship ever desire to bear a loftier title?" returned the duke, pettishly. "But what a thick-skulled fool you are! Believe you that I mean to

uproot the very soil upon which I build my stronghold? And again, deem you that Manfred, the Ghibelline, would have raised me to the exalted position of High Constable of the Kingdom were he not convinced that my intents are sincere? And that reminds me that I must have a trusty intelligencer at Rome. Poor Ascanio is gone, it seems."

"The Duke of Lesina was pleased to take it into his head that it was he who informed you of some transactions in his territories, and he hung him from the weathercock of his castle, whence he was taken down but a few days ago," said the Catalan, laughing.

"We shall persuade him out of that belief, were it nailed in his mind as tight as a bad coin on a Greek's change-table," said the duke, fiercely. "But meanwhile poor Ascanio is certainly gone, and we must find some one to supply his place. That was an excellent artifice of the Greeks, when they maltreated Sinon and so procured him entrance into Troy. What if your Scrivezzo set upon some fellow of our choosing in the vicinity of Lesina's castle and permitted him to escape into it for refuge?"

"A goodly plan, noble signor, at the proper time," replied the captain, "and then under some pretext of gratitude to enter into his service."

"You are nimble-witted for once, though your tone is apprehensive," said the duke, with an outburst of ironical mirth. "It were not amiss, either, that we had one or two more observers about our fair kinswoman, for in these times of peacemaking and general rejoicing, as many lovers will be glistening in her beauty as motes in the sunshine."

The Catalan shook his head.

"Nay, my lord, we can trust Fra Cyrillo, who learns

everything from her confessor, whom he attends. I wonder how so wise and gloomy a man can trust so much to such a shallow-brained, gossiping babbler."

"Wise — gloomy?" repeated the duke, in a startled tone. "Has she changed her confessor in our absence?"

"A Dominican, — Fra Domenico, — as stern and unbending as the decree of judgment."

The duke stood for a moment like one transfixed, his penetrating gaze riveted upon the Catalan. Then, as if remembering himself, he slightly waved his hand.

"Even so — even so! It is a great refreshment for men of dark and melancholy turn of mind to sometimes divert their fancies with those empty, shallow-brained wits, whose wisdom floats lightly as cork upon the water."

"Yet is this Fra Domenico a monk of strange demeanour, that might have been a bishop and prefers to be but a simple friar. Does that not demonstrate in him, my lord, a poor and grovelling spirit?" questioned the Catalan, with the implicit curiosity of one expecting an oracle, which the extraordinary penetration of the duke sometimes gave forth. "Though it is for that very reason of his humility and holy unconcern of this world's affairs that I, too, have chosen him for my confessor, and go to him ever when my breast hath need of a bitter purgative to feel at rest."

"Dare you go to him with any secret of mine in your breast, as you call your fleshly corselet below the steel?" said the duke, with sudden fierceness.

"Nay, my lord, for no Christian is bound to confess the sins of another, and all that I do in your Grace's service I leave to your Grace's reckoning," Crivello replied, in a rather frightened tone.

"Do as you will for that," said the duke, pacified by

the avowal of this singular principle of morality. "But this Dominican either has no ambition, or he has so much that all the gratifications yet offered to him are beneath his aim. And hark you, captain, I would have you, when you are again fearful of forgetting your sins in their multitude, carry them to some other confessional, for at times your peccadilloes are so closely interwoven with mine that you may make a slight mischance in re-counting and show the woof by the thread."

"But, my lord, I cannot sleep at times," Crivello insisted, imploringly.

"Then lie awake and plot more mischief, like your betters," replied the duke, sternly; then he added, with a meaning smile, "Or, if you must needs prattle, go to some silly, round-bellied friar, who lives and lets live, and sets men on no such foolish penances as I have seen you perform, standing in frozen steel in a winter's night, muttering your Pater Nosters to the crows on the ramparts."

"But it seems to do my soul good, signor, and I feel no comfort when I am set at easy penance, for whoever easily pardons sins like mine knows not his trade," said the pious follower of the duke.

"Your soul! Do you believe in these monkish dreams and dare to be what you are? Alas," the duke added, with a sardonic smile, "you have not been with me in the schools of Padua, where they weigh and sift and analyze the thing which you call soul, dissolve it into dust and water, and pronounce: *Non est*."

"What avails that, your Grace, when none of your sapient, long-bearded doctors can compound the elements they have dissolved — though they be but dust and water?" replied the Catalan.

"Why, now you talk not altogether like a thick-

skulled Catalanian," said the duke, somewhat startled by the reply. "But my beautiful Francesca's spell begins to work. My heart yearns to clasp her once more into these arms, though she may chide and rave like a woman who has her own objects before her, like fiends evoked by a mighty magician."

"You bid me advise her of your Lordship's intent?"

"I never send heralds to prepare others for my coming or to invite them to deceive me, especially as women rarely need the invitation," returned the duke. "Hold everything in readiness at the torre, set the watch yourself, but breathe to no mortal the meaning of your action."

Crivello bowed.

"I would go to paradise on my own merits, small though they be."

"It is a wise resolve. How old Lesina will chafe and growl and clench his fists and hold his peace, ha, ha! while we hie ourselves to our fair Francesca, burning to appear at court, burning to again show her face among women, among her own kind."

"Then you will not lead forth the lady and proclaim her your wife, my lord?"

"You rave, Crivello, verily, you rave! Proclaim the minion for my wife? The Duke of Altamura fetter himself with the toy of his leisure hours, that would change to a weight of lead when conscious of its power, and drag him who confesses himself its slave down — down — down — ha! Never! She gave herself to me for my love, let her be content with that love while she has it. And now begone and report to us at sunrise. Meanwhile send the African to me, but let no one note either his coming or your going, and let him bring the hounds with him."

"They are here, signor," said Crivello, pointing to the

dogs, who in silence, with dejected step and brooding heads, had followed their master.

“Poor beasts, they are accustomed to be thus cheated out of their reward,” said the duke, compassionately patting the heads of the two savage brutes of the bloodhound breed. “But there is no time to be lost, Crivello! I will sit and watch the bear in the skies until I have given Zem his orders, and then rejoin you in the castle.”

Crivello bowed and withdrew.

Retracing his steps up the steep path among the rocks, the Catalan could not refrain from pausing once on a projecting precipice, whence he could easily distinguish the pine-tree at the trunk of which the duke was leaning, then he strode away and was soon lost to sight.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK PENITENT

CRIVELLO had not advanced very far in the ravine, when the personage of whom he was in search luckily presented himself; an African Moor, one of the miserable victims of Oriental cruelty and jealousy, who had formerly been a mute in a Turkish seraglio, where his tongue had been slit in a manner which rendered any attempt at speech an inarticulate babble. But discretion was a quality which the duke esteemed in his instruments, and this enforced silence made the Moor doubly acceptable to his European master, in whose household he was ranked as first runner to his Grace. Of his capabilities in his former office, although never ostensibly employed, extraordinary stories were afloat; of his qualifications as runner, still more singular legends were believed. He always travelled on foot and in a straight line, swimming rivers and crossing mountains and valleys with equal facility.

The Moor's appearance would have gratified the most daring expectations which might have been based upon his rather questionable renown. If a panther had stood upright upon its hind legs, with its paws abjectly dropped in front, it would have been the exact counterpart of the Moor. Its huge, round, bestial visage, hairy, black, and brindled, with the same wild-beast expression of the

eye, would have daguerreotyped the countenance of Altamura's runner. In fact, he had little more than a rough resemblance to the general attributes of humanity, and but one or two shades of the feelings common to humankind, among which the most abject respect and obedience to his terrible master might have been reckoned.

The few simple words which the Moor, scarcely at all acquainted with the language of Italy, understood, enabled him to comprehend the Catalan's order, who, after having delivered himself of his commission, convulsively clutched the hilt of his dagger and strode away toward the city. The African in turn hastened down the ravine with such rapidity that it almost appeared as if he had doubled himself up and was rolling down like a dry bush of furze. By whatever means he gained a footing in the ravine, the Moor speedily made his way toward the appointed spot, indicated by a lofty pine of singular appearance, in that it was entirely bare with the exception of a strangely tufted summit. He found his lord with folded arms, walking restlessly up and down on a strip of green turf beneath it.

"Zem, thou art weary, my good dog; I almost wish I had not diverted myself with seeing thee chase the stag in the hills," the duke said, in a mild and somewhat cajoling manner. "But I know thy great love for me. Did I not beg thy life when the great Sultan of Damascus slashed thee once in the neck, and had raised his scimitar for a second blow?"

The Moor acquiesced with a slight snort, like that of a horse when it perceives danger.

"Yet thou must start for Bari to-night, wert thou thrice as spent," continued the duke, changing his tone to one of command. "At the inn with the dragon's

head thou wilt find Ghino di Tacco, the great Calabrian bandit. Take this ring as thy credential, and deliver into his hands the scroll wrapped in this silken kerchief."

Zem knelt, took the ring and the scroll, and placed them on his head in token of obedience.

"Follow the course of the Oreto to where the barge awaits thee—thou knowest the rest," continued the duke, and the runner made a spring, as if to dart forward on his journey, but his lord with a rapid clutch detained him.

"Delay not on thy journey as long as would a hunted stag to lap in a stream," he said, and pointing to the moon, which shone serenely above, he continued:

"In an hour yonder light will sink behind the hills. When its last rim has disappeared I shall loosen my hounds in thy traces, so if thou pause to sleep, thou knowest by what thou wilt be overtaken."

The Moor again bowed reverentially, as if the supervision indicated were a very proper and usual one, shot away like an arrow from the bow, and was almost instantly out of sight.

As it seemed with the intention of faithfully keeping his promise, the duke remained on the spot which he had selected for the interview, pausing some time in deep reflection, and then resuming his restless perambulation, without noticing that the two hounds never failed to follow him, however short the trip or sudden the turn.

And yet it was a scene and a night which might have given calm even to that perturbed and restless mind. The mountains of the Bagaria towered in a remote semicircle, in a kind of transparent darkness, so bright were the heavens above, and so soft the shadows which the moonlight cast among their rugged sides and aerial pinnacles. The distant roar of the cataract rather harmon-

ized with than disturbed the deep silence of night and of the slumbering forest and plain.

But the duke's steps rather increased in fretful rapidity, and his eyes shot impatient sparks, as he occasionally glanced up at the moon. At last he became weary of this exercise, and, leaning his back against the pine, his face upturned to the fair planet, he seemed to watch it as if his gaze could hasten or retard its imperceptible movement over the skies. The two dogs seated themselves at the side of their master, and appeared as if engaged in the same occupation, for their red, glistening eyes were fixed on the ball of light above. While the hounds and their lord were apparently absorbed in this survey, the former suddenly uttered a low whine, stretched their noses to the wind, and began to tremble in a very strange and unusual manner. The duke, after a sidelong glance at the dogs, looked in the direction whence it was evident they apprehended some approach, expecting to behold some wild beast which had strayed hither, yet for some moments even his vulture gaze could discern no object. But suddenly a black form, about the height and breadth of a man, but without the distinct outlines of one, appeared on the edge of the precipice. The duke's visage for a moment grew pale as death and his gaze became fixed as he clutched at the pine to support his tottering limbs; but the next instant either his self-possession returned, or his terror took the form of defiance. He sprang forward, and although he paused irresolutely, he shouted in an unwavering tone:

"Speak — who goes there? Friend or foe to the Duke of Altamura?"

"Hi, hi, hi! Hi, hi, hi! Hillo echoes! Hillo phantoms! Play me none of your cheats to-night!" a voice was heard gibbering in reply, the mere sound of which

restored the duke to himself. He continued to watch, but no longer with any alarm, the gradual approach of the dark traveller, who came along with singular slowness, as if he were of very great age, and talking to himself all the way. But the fears of the hounds did not diminish. They crouched on the grass and continued their low, tremulous whine. The stranger approached, without seemingly noticing any of the group. In any other age or country he might indeed have been pronounced a terrific object.

His form was greatly bent by age and his gait was feeble. With difficulty he supported himself on a staff; but his face and form were completely covered with a dark mantle made of one piece, but tied around the waist, and perforated with holes over the face, through which the eyes peered. This was the garb of a black penitent, and was enjoined to be worn on a pilgrimage by criminals of the greatest atrocity.

"Good even, father! Whither are you bound so late at night and so lonely?" queried the duke, in a cheerful tone, as if relieved from some secret apprehension.

"Lonely? When the owl hoots and the wolf howls at every turn?" replied the penitent, with a wild laugh.

"Have I not heard that voice before?" spoke the duke, musingly. "Why — art thou come as if a wish had summoned thee? Art thou not mine ancient master in the black art, Dom Alamo of Padua, who put strange thoughts into my head by showing me my fortune in a mirror of bronze, and who one night disappeared like the will-o'-the-wisp which gleams on pools where murdered men lie rotting?"

"Or like yonder tongues of fire on the hillsides," returned the penitent, extending an arm of singular length, terminated by a hand so lean and withered that it re-

sembled the branch of a fir-tree in winter, and pointing to the brow of Pellegrino, which presented a brilliant phenomenon not unusual in volcanic regions. The craggy sides of the mountain seemed as if set at intervals with blazing torches, thrust from the earth by spirit hands, for they appeared and disappeared in fantastic evolution.

"But thou art he?" said the duke, after gazing with an instant's careless attention at the spectacle on the hill-sides.

"I have been myself for a long time," replied the penitent, with a dark, chuckling laugh.

"Yes, thou art old — very old, and thou needest some comfort in thine old age," remarked the duke, cajolingly. "I am not so poor or so powerless to do my friends a good turn as I was when we studied the Cabbala together at Padua, and I still love to encourage the science. Therefore, my good wizard, if thou wilt consent to sojourn with me, thou shalt have a tower of thine own and practise thy black art night and day, and thou and I will make brazen heads that chatter, and devise antidotes, and study the plants that carry such subtle poison that it shall be a veritable pleasure to die from their effect. And play with such like toys as thou wert wont to love in the olden time when I was thine attentive and faithful pupil."

"I thank thee for thy noble offer," replied the penitent, inclining himself forward, as if to do homage to the accession of dignity in his pupil, yet with a degree of mockery in his voice. "But it behoves men who have lived over twelve hundred years to think of dying and to abjure the vanities of this world."

"Twelve hundred years! Thou ravest! Thou art stark mad, Dom Alamo!" exclaimed the duke, aghast.

“Ah! Little thou knowest how long Heaven can hate,” returned the penitent, with wild vehemence. “’Tis many a hundred years since the great bonfire was kindled, and he who spat in the face of the Son of God, when he bore his cross to Calvary, still wanders alone through all time.”

“Yet — what objection canst thou have to remain with me? Thou possessest many a noble secret which might be useful even to the Church,” said the duke, soothingly. “Have I not seen thee raise the dead in the person of that imperial phantom that held out the sceptre to me?”

“What would it help or profit to call him up again, besides shaking the towers of Aix-la-Chapelle, which are already so old and tottering?” replied the penitent.

“Thou speakest truly! But if thou canst raise the dead, canst thou not also allay them? Canst thou not bid them back into their lone grave? Why should they blot sunshine with their dark presence?” exclaimed the duke, with an impatient and fierce glitter of the eye, and convulsively knitting his hands.

“To exorcise is the office of the Church, not mine!” returned the black penitent.

“I know, I know what priests can do,” replied the duke; “I have been one myself.”

“And stand the dead, too, in thy light?” returned the penitent, his strange eyes flaring through their holes like flames — if flames could glow with meaning, with sarcastic, diabolical, insane thought.

“Thou art deft at guessing riddles,” said the duke, calmly. “It is not that I fear him, but it wearies me, when so often in the midst of a banquet or splendid feast I raise mine eyes and behold him standing before me. Think not that I fear him! I despised him living — I despise him dead! I tell thee, Dom Alamo, when

first I beheld it, when as legate of the Holy See I was at the court of Frederick's bastard, I did not even start."

"Thou givest vent to some feverish fancy, my son, the strongest of thy recollections haunts thee — one which only a stronger can efface," replied the penitent, with a short, discordant laugh. "But thou forgettest to slip the hounds, and the moon is nearly set beyond the mountain peaks."

"Didst thou hear my threat to Zem?" the duke replied, with a slight shudder. "But I never threaten in vain, else I should be no better served than mine enemies, so — whoop, hounds! After him — after him!"

He stirred the hounds, which still lay crouching and panting in the grass, as if the presence of the stranger infused terror even into their savage natures. They whined, but would not move.

"There is surely a spell about me, but I am going," observed the penitent, with his dark, inward laugh.

"It is late — be my guest for the night!" said the duke, eagerly, but the penitent shook his head.

"I may rest under no roof until the mission I am bound on is accomplished," he said, in derisive, yet profoundly gloomy tones.

"Then I will spend the night with thee in conversation under the vault of heaven."

"Nay — for I may not pause, I may not tarry," returned the penitent, taking his staff as if to resume his journey.

"But promise me at least that thou wilt visit me at Palermo," said the duke, very eagerly. "Thou hast but to present thyself at my palace, and I will see thee lodged and attended more zealously than ever Merlin in King Arthur's court. And thou shalt carry on thy black art

so near the priests and monks that thou canst spit in their faces and they shall not harm thee."

"Give me a token, then, that admission may not be denied me," replied the sage, after a moment's hesitation.

"Then I must needs give thee this emerald, which reddens when poison is in my drink," said the duke, slowly and somewhat reluctantly, taking a small leaden box about the shape and size of a dice from the pocket of his coat.

"Thou didst speak of a remedy to efface the terror that haunts me," he then said, with faltering lips, while he handed the token to the cowled figure. "Name thou the spell, for I would fain be relieved of the phantom which darkens my path and chases the slumber from mine eyes."

The black penitent chuckled almost inaudibly.

"To appease one shadow, find another, though it be never more than the phantom's pale reflex."

The duke stroked his forehead, which was bathed in cold sweat.

"The remedy is as mysterious as the ailment!" he said, but perceiving the cowled figure moving away, he continued:

"Thou canst no longer fear that I will betray thee, either for lack of faith or wit, Dom Alamo! So let me at last see thy face, which thou keepest ever so strangely masked and muffled, that I may know thee when we meet again!"

"Trust none — fear none!" replied the penitent, gloomily. "But hark! Some one is calling thee, or else what voices are those that make the rocks ring with their echoes?"

"Farewell, then — till we meet again!" said the duke, stepping forward to offer his hand in parting. But the

stranger contented himself with a fantastic salute, by waving his withered hands in the air at an extraordinary height, and, hastening forward, he almost instantly disappeared behind some projecting rocks.

Indistinct voices were indeed heard in the distance, but they resembled rather those of the jackal and the wolf than those of a human being. The hounds sprang up with their wonted alacrity the moment the adept in the black art had disappeared, and, remarking it, the duke endeavoured, but in vain, to induce the dogs to follow even the shortest distance in his trace. They howled fearfully, but would not stir until he took them back to the pine-tree where the Moor had left him. They eagerly followed his scent, and disappeared with emulous swiftness. After listening until the light patter of their feet had died away in the distance and had become inaudible even to the fine ears of the duke, the latter turned his eyes pensively toward the moon which was setting behind the western hills, and retraced his steps toward the city.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHRINE IN THE FOREST

CANALETTO was the first to announce the break of day, for, suddenly starting from his slumbers, he blew a blast upon a horn, which chanced to be near him, so loud and so shrill that it would have awakened King Arthur and all his knights from their petrified sleep in the Welsh cavern. The effect was instantaneous, and Ottorino, having been roused by the sound, which all but threw the Moorish attendants into a panic, drew aside the curtains of rich azure silk partially draping the two large folding doors opening out upon the terrace and garden below. Looking out upon it from between the glistening marble columns surrounding the palace, it seemed as if the very sky above rested edgewise on towering pyramids of red and white bloom. Awnings of pale blue stretched from the windows across the entire width of the spacious outer colonnade. Two superb peacocks strutted majestically to and fro with boastfully spreading tails and glittering crests, as brilliant as the gleam of the sun on the silver fringe of the azure canopies.

Half-blinded with the brilliancy of the scene, the dazzling glow of colour, the sheen of deep and delicate hues cunningly intermixed and contrasted, the gorgeous lavishness of waving blossoms, that seemed to surge up like a sea to the very balconies, Ottorino for a time stared

vaguely at the floor, paved with variegated mosaics and strewn with rich Indian carpets. There was something miragelike and fantastic in the splendour that surrounded him, something almost overwhelming in the wealth of this Arabian fairy-palace which he had entered under the veil of night, something well-nigh unreal, which caused him to doubt if he were waking or gazing upon the vision of a dream. The palace itself was a dome-shaped building of the purest white marble, surrounded on all sides by long, fluted colonnades and fronted by a spacious court, where flower-bordered fountains dashed up to the azure skies incessant showers of refreshing spray.

Ottorino's reveries were to be rudely broken into by the grim champion of the cask, who, stepping under the balcony, appeared to give some directions to a man-at-arms, whereupon his oscillating form was seen to sway toward the gates of the court.

The Visconti called to the leader of the condottieri, inquiring into the goal of his early expedition, thus causing that worthy to turn, with an endeavour to straighten himself into perpendicularity and to stand steadily on his legs.

Composing himself into as dignified an attitude as he could command, the capitano pointed to what appeared to be a cloister. The building was at no great distance from the palace, half-hidden in the green, and with windows, small and round as portholes, which gave it a fortress-like appearance. The echoes of a pronouncedly secular chant were faintly audible, floating on the fitful morning breezes, which wafted the perfumes of innumerable roses, oleanders, and magnolias through the gardens of La Khalesa.

"I wager," he replied, "yonder are none of your lean and ghostly friars, whose sanctified bones rattle in the

sirocco, but holy men with three roses in their complexion, one in full bloom on each cheek and one on the tip of their nose. I'll recommend myself to their hospitality."

Ottorino's gaze followed the direction indicated; several round-faced brothers in the brown cassocks of Benedictines were to be discerned through the vines of a pergola.

"But the hour, Canaletto," the Lombard laughingly remonstrated. "Bethink thyself! Canst thou ever hope to attain the exalted state of the angels in bliss?"

"Angels in bliss?" roared the capitano, inflating his cheeks and starting on his legs. "To sit on a damp cloud and chant hallelujah for ever — I fear me Canaletto was spoiled for such an airy sport!"

"So have with thee — but forget not thy devoir to the Golden Viper!" Ottorino admonished the prospective crusader. Waving a fantastic salutation with his right arm, the grim champion strode away and was soon lost among the leafy arcades leading to the goal of his unholy desires.

A message from the master of ceremonies informed the Lombard of the postponement of the formal presentation at court, owing to the delayed arrival from the mainland of the brothers Lancia and Capece, chief councillors of the realm. Far from feeling any regret in the matter, Ottorino gladly welcomed the tidings, intending to avail himself of the opportunity of surveying the surrounding country. Being rather in a mood for solitary musing, he determined to start out at once.

It was a morning such as is only seen in southern climes, the air so pure and bright that it seemed to reveal all objects as if through a shining medium of glass. A faint rosiness tinged the transparent blue of the sky, and

all the mountain peaks were touched with a deeper hue of the same beautiful colour. The Conca d'Oro, though partially veiled in mists, began to disclose its richness and variety. Little villages appeared nestling at the craggy bases of the Bagaria; feudal castles towered on remote pinnacles; forests of pine waved freshly in the wind; pastures of the brightest emerald green bordered the Oreto; every fissure, nook, and cranny of the Pellegrino displayed wild flowers of brilliant hues, every fan of the soft morning breeze brought some sweet scent. So fresh and lovely shone the scene, as he journeyed along the wild path which bordered the river, passing through its tangled underbrush of myrtles, stunted vines, and high weeds, which sometimes nearly concealed both horse and rider, while the loftier forest-trees continually showered their golden dew on him, that Ottorino could not help repeating to himself the eulogy which his lips had unconsciously uttered when first the Conca d'Oro broke upon his gaze.

Leaving Monreale on the right, Ottorino entered upon a narrow path leading along a ravine, honeycombed with almost prehistoric cave-dwellings. These were still inhabited by the impoverished descendants of the ancient Pelasgians, who had formed here a number of colonies. Anemones, tall and strong, cast their shadows over wild mignonettes, while graceful asphodels surrounded the base of the olive and caroub trees. In the white, glaring sunlight their stems looked weird and unearthly as they bent slowly to the sea-breeze. Their strange, pungent smell was wafted up to the skies; they seemed fit flowers for the spirits and for the shades of the dead to dwell among. On all sides extended lonely stretches of country; the fantastic shapes of palm and plane trees seemed to cover with their shadows innumerable old tombs, crypts, and

caverns; remains of ancient temples were scattered about on every side, while huge boulders, overgrown with rosemary, myrtle, and lentisk, made it seem as if here had taken place the celebrated conflict between the Titans and Giants of old.

Traversing with abstracted gaze this leafy wilderness, a sudden opening in the forest-trees revealed to Ottorino a watery waste, dotted with islands of rank verdure, which stretched far to westward. A herd of buffaloes, grazing at some distance from each other or wallowing in the foul marsh, were the only animated objects visible. Whether these animals were wild, and as such the prey of all who dared to attempt their destruction, — whether they were the property of some feudal baron who required their carcasses, — Ottorino did not know. But suddenly he came upon a body of spearmen, who, surrounding the skirt of the marsh, endeavoured with shouts and by goading with weapons to drive the herd toward the adjacent forest, where a squadron of mounted archers awaited their approach, ready to overwhelm them with javelins and arrows. The ferocity and prodigious strength of the animals made the first part of this enterprise full of danger. The Lombard, taking but little interest in the chase, continued upon his way, when suddenly he came upon a scene which so strangely attracted his notice that he halted to gaze upon it.

He had reached a point where the forest descended into one of those deep ravines from which arise the rocks whereon the mediæval watch-towers rear their massive walls. A city, picturesquely built upon the brow of the opposite hill, surrounded by walls and crowned with a strong castle, appeared at some distance. The country around was richly cultivated, the mountain being completely covered with vines and olives, and the plain wav-

ing with verdant pastures, on which fed white steers and numerous flocks of sheep. Ceres indeed seemed to have emptied her horn over this garden-spot of Sicily, and Ottorino concluded in his musing survey that the land belonged to some monastery, the sanctity of which protected its possessions from spoliation. His belief seemed to receive confirmation by a scene of a very ecclesiastical character, which he observed in the ravine below.

From its groves of cypress and pines rose the fantastic shafts of a Byzantine shrine. From the top rose a cross, at the base of which the figure of the Virgin knelt, embracing it, while some saint in the garb of a monk stood by and offered consolation. At the top of some circular steps stood a Dominican, preaching apparently with great fervour to a crowd below. Numerous groups of listening peasants in wild but gaily tinted garbs stood or knelt around the shrine, their deeply bronzed countenances glowing with agitation and religious zeal. Many pilgrims, known by the bearing of the rosemary branch, were among them, and two or three men-at-arms in the livery of the Duke of Altamura were to be seen among the trees.

But the principal group surrounded a lady, who appeared to be of very high rank. She sat in a gilded chair opposite the preacher, while several ecclesiastics, whose gorgeous robes proclaimed them to be the chapter of a cathedral, stood around. A number of richly attired ladies, forming, no doubt, the escort, were also standing, and a litter of purple silk, borne on gilded poles by four Nubian slaves, could be observed at some distance. Even at the height where he was placed Ottorino could not but remark the queenly grace and bearing of the lady who was the central figure, and his curiosity was kindled when he remarked her raiment of material not to be despised by a queen, and which revealed rather than

obscured the great beauty of her form. A hand of snowy whiteness, on which she leaned in listening attitude, partially concealed her face, and her dark hair, wound in a Grecian knot, heightened by its contrast the fairness of her complexion.

This apparition was the more extraordinary, as the shrine appeared to be decked out for a festival, every part and pinnacle of the elaborate masonry being hung with garlands of flowers. So deeply was the Lombard impressed with the spectacle that, observing an uneven path before him which descended into the ravine, he followed it some little way. Suddenly a crashing noise, mingled with shouts, induced him to turn his head. He beheld an enormous black buffalo bull, stung to madness by dense swarms of gadflies, with his tufted tail high in the air, rushing down the steep, pursued by a horseman at full gallop, laughing and shouting in the hilarity of the chase. But he was certainly ignorant of the fact that the whole herd was at his rear, following the flight of their leader and urged on by the spearmen, who rode after them in the hope of turning their course. Ottorino perceived at a glance the destruction which must ensue among the defenceless multitude below, if the herd arrived while they were thus absorbed. He therefore set spurs to his horse, and dashed down the declivity with a warning cry. A direful uproar instantly arose below, more especially so as, unable to check his horse upon his reaching the ravine, the armed phantom, precipitated thus suddenly among the unwary worshippers, dashed around the shrine and left in full view the approach of the terrific and maddened bull. The peasants, with an outcry of terror, rushed away in every direction, falling over one another in their flight; pilgrims, slaves, and monks all fled in terrified confusion, with the exception of the

Dominican who had been preaching. When Ottorino brought his steed around, he perceived that the monk, unarmed as he was, had rushed before the chair, from which the fair occupant had risen but not fled, for she stood there as if transfixed with horror, calling alternately on the Virgin and on her fugitive vassals for protection, pale, but disdaining to partake in their cowardly flight. To perceive that the buffalo was rushing full tilt at the lady, that only the gaunt figure of the friar stood between her and destruction, and to dash forward with his mighty war-steed between them and the furious brute, were almost simultaneous actions with Ottorino.

The buffalo was of prodigious size and strength, — an African bull of the largest species, covered with black, shaggy hair; its vast forehead was so broad that its curled horns, which might separately have measured ten feet, could not compass it; its neck was of amazing bulk, its small, red eyes were whirling in eddies of fire, its nose was close to the ground, its whole enormous strength was concentrated like a battering-ram, and increased by its wild velocity. Such was the assailant to which the young Lombard opposed himself. Not, indeed, with the insane purpose of receiving its shock, for, swerving his terrified horse with a dexterity which would have done credit to a bull-fighter of later days, Ottorino seized the lightning instant when the buffalo rushed past, and struck one terrific blow with his sword at the point where the spine enters the brain. The bull's career came to an instantaneous stop; simultaneously his vast flank was pierced by the pursuing horseman's spear. The weapon shivered to pieces, and the rider was tossed far over the buffalo's neck, so great was his impetuosity. But the spear had pierced the beast's entrails, and with a roar of anguish which seemed to shake the glen, and tossing torrents of

its black blood around, the wretched animal fell with all its monstrous carcass, and rolled over on its back in the agonies of death. The herd which followed, dismayed at the sound, suddenly paused, and then, seized with a panic, turned on their pursuers. The horseman, a gaudy nobleman of the duke's suite, sprang to his feet, but little hurt by his fall, and flew to assist the archers. Ottorino, who had dismounted, hastened with a basin full of water from a near-by fountain to assist the lady, whom the Dominican had borne in his arms, chair and all, up the steps of the shrine, where she now lay insensible.

The monk knelt, supporting her in his arms and vainly chafing her brows. As the approaching Lombard gazed upon the motionless form, stretched as if lifeless upon the stairs of the shrine, his hand seemed to forget the purpose of its master, for he still held the ewer filled with the water from the spring. Never in his remotest dreams had he beheld a face more lovely, never in all the years spent at the Northern courts had his eyes feasted on a beauty so matchless, a form so perfect. Like one dazed, he at last staggered toward the prostrate form, and, bending over her, was absorbed as intensely in his efforts to revive her as if, like the sculptor demigod, he were kindling marble into life with stolen fire. The monk zealously aided, while he despatched a peasant, who had ventured to return, in quest of the canon of a near-by monastery, who possessed some skill in the medical art.

And like the vivification of the love-hewn Grecian statue under the magic touch of Prometheus, was the return to life of the beautiful ward of the Dominican. A pale pink, like flame on marble, gradually crept over her snowy pallor, deepened to rose on the cheeks, to coral on the lips; the large, humid, velvety eyes, with their long, silken lashes, opened, and the return of sensa-

tion to the soul was marked by the flush, which deepened all those lovely tints when she perceived Ottorino bending over her, and met a gaze whose natural hauteur was softened into almost feminine tenderness. She drew her robes about her neck with the gesture of a nymph of Diana discovered when bathing, and, murmuring some incoherent words of thanks which sounded to him like strains of sweetest music, she raised herself feebly in the arms of the Dominican. Gazing for an instant at the monstrous beast which lay wallowing in a pool of its own gore, she shuddered convulsively, then, turning to the Lombard with such a look of admiration and gratitude that it kindled to devouring flame the spark in his soul, she said, in a tone which showed that her anxiety was altogether transferred from herself to him:

“Signor — are you hurt?”

“In no wise, noble lady, save the apprehension lest the world should lose its masterpiece of beauty,” replied the Lombard, with a warmth which deepened the flush on her cheeks.

“And my poor vassals and the good monks?” she continued, with a faint smile, turning to the Dominican.

“They left you to your fate, daughter, and you may well leave them to theirs. Yet all are safe,” replied the monk, sternly. “But your litter is nigh, and the multitude are gazing.”

Blushing still more deeply, the lady seated herself in her chair, while the Dominican hurried down among the people, who now began to return from their panic armed with staves and stones, ordering them to raise the litter, which its bearers had dropped to the ground. But he returned with surprising rapidity, bringing a rich mantle which seemed to belong to the lady, and which he had scarcely time to throw over her ere a multitude of men-

at-arms dashed down the ravine at a gallop, led by the Duke of Altamura in person.

It seemed as if this military avalanche infused some new and excessive terror into the lady's mind. She started up with a glance full of fear and suspicion even at her rescuer, but her strength was exhausted, and she would have fallen had not Ottorino put his strong arm about her waist and supported her. Thus assisted, and gazing up with a look of supplication to the stalwart warrior, who, with a mingled expression of delight and protection, returned her ardent gaze, her fears seemed momentarily to subside. The Lombard's heart heaved so wildly that he was fully convinced that she whom he held in his arms must hear its beating even through the coat of linked mail. But ere he could frame his thoughts into adequate language, the duke had leaped from his steed, rushed up the steps of the shrine, and exclaimed, his face wild with alarm :

“Helena! Our Helena! Are you hurt?”

As the duke pronounced the fatal name, as his bright, steely eyes blazed first upon the lady, turning from her with undisguised surprise to Ottorino, the knight turned deadly pale and almost dropped his supporting arm. All the rumours afloat of the Lady of Miraval, this second Helen of Troy, whose countless suitors, lured on to the verge of delirium, had come to such mysterious ends, rushed through the Lombard's brain and increased his confusion. An undercurrent of feelings, as potent as they were new, seemed to compel him toward her, even as he precipitately retreated from the shrine. The lady of Miraval glanced at him with profound astonishment, and grew very pale; then the blood returned in crimson, not only to her brow, but to her whole frame, for even her beautiful white shoulders became suffused. The expres-

sion of fear, of intense doubt, which, however momentarily, had painted itself on the noble and haughty face of her deliverer, was not to be misconstrued. After a moment of startled wonder, a whirl of thoughts seemed to rush upon Helena di Miraval; then the pallor returned, and she sank down in her chair as if relapsing into the swoon.

All pressed around eagerly with assistance save Ottorino, who, torn by conflicting emotions, stood immovable by the shrine. The duke sternly commanded that none should mount the stairs save the monk who had just arrived from the monastery and who was rubbing a rosemary branch, discarded by some fugitive pilgrims, in his hands, and applying the strong scent to revive the lady. Its effect was soon evident, for, stretching her hand to the monk, she murmured, in a low voice:

"Father, call the Dominican and let us begone! I am not well here!"

When the latter raised his head in response to the summons from the shrine, the duke's gaze for the first time rested upon his blanched features. He started, but the friar's countenance remained cold and imperturbed.

"Do you not know me, Helena — your kinsman, Ferrando?" The duke turned from the monk to the lady, while a tone of crouching humility, unusual in his voice, rang through his speech.

"Ferrando, our kinsman — yes, truly," she replied, starting up without assistance and with a degree of wildness. "Welcome, signor! I am very well, in no wise injured — but what brings you here, you and your soldiers? Why do you disturb our worship and break into the sanctity of our retreat? Why are our peaceful festivals broken into by armed men?"

"Fear nothing, daughter, all is well," interposed the Dominican. "The duke is here by chance."

"Your pardon — fear hath for a time darkened remembrance," replied the lady, breaking down in tears, and adding with a hysteric smile: "Oh, no, no, no! We have to fear no usurpation of our grants from our kinsman. Welcome, then, signor — home from your victories."

"In faith, you sent such scant tidings of your doings during our absence that I pray you, my fair kinswoman, how was I to know that I was trespassing on your charter?" said the duke, with his usual affectation of careless good humour. "But here is one with me who I know will find a warmer welcome — my friend, Lucio San Severino!"

He turned, and with a slight and almost contemptuous gesture indicated the presence of the nobleman, who, pale and quivering with emotion, ascended some of the steps and knelt before the lady, while Ottorino's countenance betrayed a deadly pallor, as with lips tightly set he viewed the newcomer, in whom he recognized the horseman whose lance had finished the work of his sword.

The Count of San Severino was of spare but muscular form; his dark Spanish features bore traces of debauchery, while his age might have been reckoned at forty. The coxcombry of his bearing filled the Lombard from the start with an antipathy which, unknown to him, was shared by no small number of those present.

"Signor — Ferrando — this is not kind!" exclaimed Helena, with an angry glance, and coldly extending her hand, which the Apulian passionately kissed. "I am not in a mood to receive such homage, and, with your permission, I will at once proceed upon my way, whither I cannot ask you to join me, as it would but delay you."

"But first, noble lady, pardon the unwitting cause of this disaster, who would a thousand times rather have

perilled his own life than that of so peerless a lady!" San Severino croaked, still retaining his kneeling position.

With a flashing glance of contempt Helena di Miraval turned from the whining cavalier.

"Our gratitude toward one who perilled his safety for ours has long caused us to forget the whimsical cause of what might have proven our destruction, though, like a truly generous giver, he seems to have already forgotten what he has bestowed."

"Thank chance, lady, not its blind instrument," Ottorino replied, coldly. "Even this holy man hazarded himself without arms in your defence!"

Again Helena glanced at the Lombard with an expression half of pride, half of supplication, but marvelously beautiful; an emotion which pouted the lips with haughtiness, at the same time moistening the fire of the eyes as if with tears.

San Severino had risen and was on the point of speaking, when the deep, melancholy voice of the Dominican was heard.

"It was no part of thy pilgrimage to expose thyself to the gaze of the world, daughter. The litter is prepared and thy guards are in readiness."

Many eyes were turned toward the monk as he spoke, for, although his words were sufficiently commonplace, there was a strange ring of warning and even menace in his tones which excited a vague echo in every heart. And his composed and majestic countenance offered much incitement to curiosity. It was one which a painter might have taken for St. Paul but for its pain and gloom, — St. Paul, converted after a life of warlike broils and violent passions.

"We shall meet again in Palermo, where our kinsman,



"SHE HASTENED DOWN THE STEPS TO THE LITTER"

the duke, will thank you, knight, for a life which he values beyond its worth," said Helena, with a beseeching look and wavering smile which Ottorino found almost impossible to resist. He approached and, bending over her outstretched hands, pressed his lips upon them. The blush which again dyed her fair face was rendered more glowingly beautiful by the expression of joy spreading over it in a rush of rosy light. As she hastened down the steps to the litter, the duke advanced to offer his assistance; but, seeming not to notice his gesture, she offered her hand to the Lombard. After taking her seat, it appeared as if she were about to go without any ceremony of farewell, but, suddenly remembering herself, she turned and bent to the chief personages of the group with the grace and majesty of the fair goddess whose several attributes were so lavishly bestowed upon her.

But amidst all these plumed and helmeted heads bending in homage, her eye sought only the stately form of the Visconti, resting on him but for a flash of thought. She then beckoned to her attendants to proceed, and rallying her scattered retinue around her, she departed. In a few moments the principal evidences of the interrupted festival which remained were the bleeding buffalo and the garlanded shrine.

"Whew! This is cold courtesy, brother Lucio," said the duke, with a sneer, slapping San Severino on the back. "By the silver keys — yon Northern knight might prove an unwelcome rival."

San Severino frowned, and his eyes fell with a somewhat fierce expression on the Lombard. No further words passed until the cavaliers had remounted. Leaving the buffalo herd to roam unmolested, they retraced their way through the forest toward Palermo. At the urgent request of the duke, Ottorino had joined the com-

pany, and it was remarked that the Lombard, usually reticent and reserved, began to speak much and hurriedly, as if to silence some importunate inner thought. San Severino rode sullen and silent on the other side of the duke, who seemed to take pleasure in the hectic gaiety of the Lombard's remarks, while he compared their last adventure, with much praise to Ottorino, to the achievements of the ancient paladins, to whom the destruction of the most prodigious monsters was a daily pastime.

After having jointly partaken of refreshments in an adjacent monastery, the duke and his company continued toward Palermo, whose towers and pinnacles came in sight as the sun was declining in the west. Just as they approached the gates the spectacle of the previous evening was repeated, and a sea of fire, like the lava-eruption of a volcano, enveloped the area of the Torre del Diavolo.

For a moment the duke reined in his charger, staring aghast, then, parting from his company, he left them to their own surmises regarding the nature of the phenomenon they had witnessed.

CHAPTER V.

THE TORRE DEL DIAVOLO

THE Torre del Diavolo had relapsed into the limpid darkness of the Southern night. The masses thronging the Piazza del Duomo and the Kassaro were gradually dispersing; the nobles and vassals to fortified palaces, the men-at-arms to their assigned quarters, the populace to their houses and hovels. As if watching the gradual sinking of the city into calm, two persons slowly left the large square and bent their steps toward the desolate region where the ramparts of the Torre overlooked the plain and the Oreto, one keeping slightly behind the other with the respect of an inferior, though engaged in apparently confidential dialogue.

"You have now with your own eyes seen what seemed incredible in the account I gave your Lordship yesterday," said Crivello, as they approached the gloomy structure. "Shall I apprise the lady of your Highness's approach?"

"We shall be our own herald," returned the duke, while he leisurely ascended a flight of narrow steps leading to a bastion in the tower and entered a still narrower doorway, followed by Crivello.

Passing through a series of apartments furnished in a style of massive but antique grandeur, the duke and his captain descended by a succession of winding stairs and corridors. All the principal points of access or egress to

these subterranean chambers were guarded by sentinels from the company of Catalans. The remote lamps of these guards, with the gleam of the bright night sky through deep shafts perforated in the thick walls, afforded the only light.

"Who are your chief prisoners? Have you yet had time to inquire?" said the duke, as they descended through the dark labyrinth.

"I am not, I trow, to consider Donna Francesca as one, although she be guilty of the heinous accusation of being a nun who forsook her orders?" replied Crivello, with a grin, the sneering malice of which was concealed by the gloom.

"That is as I shall find her humour disposed, for I will have no whimpering maidens wailing after me," returned the duke. "But go on — who lodges above?"

"Jacopo di Sermoneta, the former notary, who so carelessly misdirected one of your Highness's letters. They say he has lost his reason and spends the whole day sticking his hooked nose through the bars of his cage looking up to heaven, as if he expected some visitor from up there!"

"Let him look on! There is enough of the blue sky for all of us to stare at," replied the duke. "But where does Lorenzo Ani, the friar, who mistook our confession for his breviary and recited it, keep his state?"

"He retracts his former confession and denies the accusation as obstinately as ever!"

"So much the worse for him! But what music is this we hear? It seems to float from the grottoes at our left."

"'Tis the musician Pelagrua, who for the love of his lady, whom your Highness was besieging at Avigliano, attempted your life with poisoned letters!" replied Cri-

vello. "They have left him the flute, and as the grottoes are dark as night all day, he has no other amusement but to play on it!"

"What say you — Pelagrua alive?"

"The king was pleased to spare his life!"

"He breathes into his reed so utter a hopelessness that to gibbet him were to do him a kindness," said the duke. "But this place is very dark, Crivello, and by the cold, damp air I should say we were near the entrance of some cavern or vault."

"We shall soon have light enough, my lord, although certainly it were not ill if I returned above for a lamp," returned Crivello, with a slight shudder. "This is the entrance to the secret gallery leading to the sepulchral vaults of the Norman kings. Donna Francesca busies herself very much therein, for it is there she pursues her study of the black art, and, as they say, can raise the evil one at her will — all holy saints keep us from harm and absolve our wretched souls. There are not wanting some who aver that she has made the great stone head in the corridor speak, and brought the ghost of Emperor Henry the Sixth out of his marble sarcophagus."

"Lead on — lead on — and cease your nursery babble," said the duke, in a contemptuous tone, a tone which, despite the vigour of his mind and his great skepticism, was assumed, for the general belief in magic and necromancy was, as we have seen, abundantly shared by this strangely compounded intellect.

But at the same moment one of the sudden suspicions, natural to so dark a mind, struck him that Crivello meditated some treachery, and was leading him within the reach of ambushed assassination. He started back, drew his poniard, and but that he beheld at this instant a distant glow in a gallery beneath, the valiant captain

himself might have been in no better plight than the imperial spectre whose enforced reappearance he had alluded to.

"Return and bring me a lamp! Yonder light will guide me the rest of my way," said the duke, concealing the weapon under his cloak as he brushed past the Catalan, who disappeared with a profound bend hardly discernible in the murky twilight. The duke proceeded with cautious steps and keen glances toward the place from whence came the radiance which glowed on the lofty wall, revealing in spots the ancient granite foundations of the pile. The mutilated remains of many an old form of Moorish superstition gave a terrible and supernatural aspect to the interior of the gallery. A circular hole now appeared in the earth, resembling a well of light. In its centre a massive pillar of granite arose, into which the arches of a vaulted chamber converged. So intricate were these arches that it was some moments ere the duke, though acquainted with the place, discerned the steps which wound through the hollow pillar into the vault.

Meanwhile he was occupied with considering the extraordinary scene that presented itself to his gaze through the ruined dome which it was probable had at one time completely hidden the secret passage.

At a considerable depth below appeared an extensive chamber apparently excavated in the rock, on which the foundations of the sombre pile were laid, and behind this chamber extended grottoes and vast stretches of corridors.

A great fire, evidently of innocuous flame, blazed with extraordinary splendour in a gigantic sarcophagus, without emitting smoke or consuming the waxen figure which reposed in the midst of it. The fire burned on the top

of an altar, supported by couching sphinxes, and shed its lurid glow over the chamber. The duke smiled, though not without some secret disquietude, imagining that he recognized in the fire-enwrapped figure a striking resemblance to his own form and features. On its breast lay a skull, in which there appeared a substance resembling a human heart, or that of some animal of similar organization, recently torn from the breast where it had been wont to beat. Two ancient hags were busied in continually ladling this skull full of the beautiful flames in the sarcophagus, or in feeding them with strange ingredients, which were heaped around. Phials of Eastern configuration were there, filled with curious oils, naphtha, and fluids unknown to the modern pharmacy, inventions chiefly of Arab or Greek chemists in the pursuit of sciences abhorred then and despised now. These potions were supposed to possess magic or cabalistical virtues, known only to the initiated. There were bundles of herbs, chiefly of the dreary plants alien to human life, which sprout in churchyards or in ruins,—hemlock, nightshade, ivy, vervain, and mingled with these were the most precious drugs of remote lands, from India and Iceland. Mosses covered with the froth of an insect, which was then supposed to be produced by the direct influence of the moon, glittering dust of gold and pounded diamonds, a multitude of strange animals, such as bats, lizards, toads, and select portions of other reptiles, were there. A pile of what seemed to be the head and eyes of a mummy, which one of the haggard attendants occasionally rasped into a fine powder over the supplies of fuel, and an infinite variety of the most beautiful flowers, composed the extraordinary supplies.

The malicious and enigmatical features of the sphinx and the caryatides, which brightened and darkened with

the wavering of the flames, as if at times about to utter their secrets, relapsing as suddenly into profound and impenetrable gloom, seemed rather a repetition of than a contrast to the living countenances of the two weird women who superintended the mysterious rites.

The duke immediately recognized in them two female apothecaries with whom he had had some dealings in the past. Both were tall and large boned; both aged, and yet of remarkable bodily strength and agility. They were so hideously ugly that they would have made the devil's flesh creep, and they combined every evil trait and characteristic of their Moorish extraction. Their real names were unknown or had been forgotten in the profuse universality of their nicknames, to which they themselves answered without hesitation or apparent dislike. Their father was said to have been a Moorish wizard of transcendent skill, which he was supposed to owe to a compact with the demons of Mount Eblis. There were some, however, who hesitated not to malign the devil by asserting that he had been the parent of these two sisters, and that, after instructing them in many hellish arts, he had set them up with an ample stock of poisonous drugs and left them on earth to make the best of it. While to all appearances extremely destitute, the sisters were credited with possessing great wealth, gained from their un-earthly traffic. It was also hinted that they possessed a powerful, though secret, protector, to whose vengeance their accursed art had time and again been serviceable.

The duke's eyes scarcely glanced over these fearful and disagreeable objects ere they rested on a form which, although not without a mixture of the terrible in its beauty, displayed in its disorder of apparel and look much to attract the gaze even of a nature less sensually inclined than that of Ferrando, Duke of Altamura. It was

that of a woman of classic stature, the features carved with the statuesque regularity which the Roman beauty still retains, and distinguished by a haughty and fiery expression, well suited to a descendant of the ancient masters of the world.

She was attired in a long black robe, girdled with a silver serpent and loosened as if to allow room for the tempestuous heavings of her bosom. She half-sat, half-reclined on the steps of the sarcophagus in an attitude at once expressive of enforced resignation and impatience. Often she gazed wildly around, often she started at the crackle or flash of the flames. Sometimes she upbraided the hags with the slow progress of the incantation, at others she snatched an open volume before her, emblazoned with strange figures and characters, and read in a distracted and hurried tone the directions which it apparently contained for the due performance of the spell. She had dashed away her silver diadem, and the dark waves of her hair, falling over her naked shoulders, revealed and heightened their perfect contour and whiteness. The expression of her countenance was at once celestial and fiendish. Contending passions, hope and despair, love and hatred, at times rendered diabolical the face with all its rare, exquisite beauty, at others sunk it into what was perhaps its habitual cast, that of the pride and supernatural melancholy of the fallen angel.

"He comes not—he comes not—he will never come!" she exclaimed, as the duke gazed. "And you do but mock me with your mad mutterings and powerless herbs. He is even now clasping to his heart another, assuring her of his love, upbraiding his long absence from her arms, and gives not a thought, not a sigh, not one recollection to all-abandoned Francesca! And why should he! What charms have I to lure him back, what spell

is there in my beauty to bind him to me for ever — a beauty which sorrow and disgrace and infamy have ravaged, and time — time — time! For I am aged with misery and grief!”

“Nay, daughter, when thou art as old as we, there will be time enough to reckon years,” returned one of the dark-skinned sibyls, dipping the stiff body of a viper into a blue oil, which cast out a noisome odour as she stirred it.

“No more — no more, my friends,” continued the lady, in a tone of profound and utter despair. “It is a useless task — leave me to die, for what have I to live for?”

“It is worth staying in this world were it only to keep out of the next,” said the other of the skeleton carcass, in a strange whistling voice, while with a grin she showed her white but deformed and unnaturally long teeth. “And as for beauty — when thou art as lank and lean as we — then mayest thou lament thy vanished loveliness.”

“And were you ever beautiful?” said Francesca, gazing at the speaker with a wild yet absent look.

“Beautiful as the houris, Donna Francesca,” replied the hag, with a malignant and envious leer at the beautiful girl, who scarcely noticed that she was speaking, “and what can repay me for being so old and withered before my time?”

“Thou lying book and still more lying prophets,” Francesca exclaimed, dashing the mysterious volume from her, “if the spell of love is over, what is there in magic that can replace its power? But does the traitor think to trample thus on me? Oh, Ferrando, thou hast made a demon of me — look to it that it prove not one who will tear her maker to pieces!”

The sisters looked at each other, exchanged smiles, such as serpents might give, and resumed their toils.

A silence of some moments followed, during which

Francesca leaned her burning cheeks on her hand and gazed with eager and devouring eyes upon the burning sarcophagus.

"An emperor's dust may be calcining there — what more can the pride of the son of the morning require?" she said, at length, in a melancholy, musing tone.

"I told thee, daughter, that the heart should be taken from a living man and not from a dead reptile," said one of the hags, shaking her long, skinny finger emphatically at the contents of the skull.

"Thou talkest now indeed as remorselessly as death itself," said Francesca, with a convulsive shudder. "We have followed to his very letter the commands of Dom Alamo and the book he gave us."

"Dom Alamo! For my part I would so great a master as he reports himself would take the trouble and shame of his own failure," answered the hag, peevishly, while she looked for approbation to her sister, whose superiority and keener intellect she seemed to recognize.

"Yea, sister, we are not to blame if the duke comes not nearer this tower — in which no follower of the house of Lesina may venture — to-night than a hawk to the nest of an eagle," returned the malignant crone.

"A Lesina — a Lesina! Oh, that there were a saint in heaven to whom I could shriek for mercy," exclaimed the young woman, throwing herself with frantic violence on the sphinx's steps in a tearless agony of despair.

"Yield not thus hastily, daughter," said the hag in authority, perhaps somewhat touched or alarmed by the excess of this silent anguish. "Although we fail with this spell of thine unknown Magus, we may do better with one of our own, which is in our father's books, the wisest and greatest since Zoroaster compelled the sun

to stand still in heaven during a year of days and nights! But be patient — patient — patient!”

“We must have a warm human heart, not that of a cold snake,” remarked her sister, contemptuously.

“Take out your brass sickle then and tear out mine, for ’tis on fire in my breast,” said Francesca, ravingly pointing to an instrument, which in obedience to the traditions of the craft the sisters used in gathering their herbs.

Again they exchanged their mysterious, but dreadful, smile, and continued their labours in silence, interrupted by the disconsolate sighs and moanings of Francesca.

At last, either wearied with these expressions of anguish, or because the grand moment of projection had arrived, Moira, the older of the sisters, made a sign to Gorgo, the younger.

“We must now burn the heart in naphtha and frankincense,” she said. “Thou, daughter, put on the wreath of purple nightshade, and with bare feet and scattering flowers walk continually around the sarcophagus, singing love-songs in a sweet, persuasive voice until we bid thee desist, when he will appear, or Dom Alamo, adept of the Arabian school though he be, is a fool and a liar!”

The pale girl arose listlessly and despairingly, and while the hags mumbled and assisted one another in preparing their drugs and fluids over the fiery sarcophagus, she slowly and hopelessly collected a heap of flowers in her arms, and bound her brows with the gloomy garlands indicated by the weird women.

Not a movement in this drama was lost upon the unseen spectator, and, although it is possible that the passion which the despairing girl displayed for him excited rather his contempt than his compassion, the duke was not altogether insensible to its warmth. Still he re-

solved to mortify the sorceresses, and prove the futility of their spell by not appearing until they had exhausted it and despaired of its success.

The hags had now completed their preparations, and the heart appeared surrounded by a pure flame of naphtha. They continued heaping it with frankincense, and Francesca commenced her perambulation, scattering flowers and singing with a voice which, however wild and troubled, was passionate and melting; while with a frenzied fervour that gave her the aspect and inspired effulgence of beauty which would have befitted a Delphic sibyl, she chanted the lines of her incantation.

As she sang, the voluptuous and affecting recollections kindled by her words, the melody of her voice, her beauty, her despair, the intoxicating vapours of the drugs, roused the duke's passions into flames. In the delirium and enthusiasm of returning love, if love we may dare to call it, Ferrando forgot his determination and desire to disappoint the hags. He entered the winding hollow of the pillar, and, turning round and round with giddy rapidity, descended and arrived at the exit at the very instant when the flames of the naphtha had expired, and the incantation had ceased. As he leaped into the chamber, Francesca had halted like a figure suddenly transformed into stone. With a wild shriek, which the vault reëchoed, she rushed into his arms, while the hags, after a momentary pause of surprise, clapped their withered hands in congratulation. Showers of tears amidst wild laughter, sobs, sighs, and kisses, delirious with passion and joy, a thousand broken exclamations of delight and despair, love and reproach, and the embraces which in their frantic ardour overstepped or ignored the limits of womanly reserve, betrayed the convulsive reaction in the

soul of the despairing victim of the duke's licentious nature.

"And did you deem any other spell necessary to lure me back to you than the memory of your beauty and our past happiness?" said Ferrando, kissing away the tears, which continued to flow over the now crimsoning cheeks.

"Nay, Ferrando, nay! I but desire to hear you say that you have not utterly abandoned me, to know that I am not altogether alone in the universe in the presence of that God whom I betrayed," exclaimed the lady of the Torre del Diavolo. "Tell me that you do not despise and loathe me, as I do myself! Remember that, though I have lost all, I have lost all for you! Remember that I was the bride of Christ, the daughter of one of the first Apulian houses, innocent, happy, loved! Remember what I was once and what I am now, — a wretch under the malediction of heaven and earth, — an outcast of the illustrious house whose fair name I have darkened, — remember all the oaths which you have broken, remember that — oh, what have I not suffered and lost for you! And can I, can I ever forgive you, Ferrando? Can I ever do aught but hate and curse you and wear out my soul in imprecations on your head?"

"Curse me — curse me, then, my lovely flower. I for my part will content myself with kissing your sweet pouting lips," said the duke, renewing his caresses. "But do you, too, reproach me with my miseries on this ill-starred and unwilling journey of mine? For your frenzy must be running on that particular point."

"Yes, traitor — yes, fathomless betrayer!" exclaimed Francesca, with sudden fury, while she tore herself from his embrace. "And dare you with unblushing face speak to me of that consummation of all perfidy, that perjury

unmatched, which alone shall damn you below the blackest fiends of hell, — the betrayers of a thousand generations of men? Villain — villain — villain! Is this your pledge, sworn by oaths that made the stars turn pale, that you would make me your queen, your wife?"

One of the sisters smiled and began mumbling in her teeth, but the other breathlessly signed to her not to interrupt the conversation, so much to her malign and misanthropic taste.

"I remember the occasion well," said the duke, in a cajoling and yet ironical tone. "You remind me well, my bright Francesca. We were in the vineyards of the gloomy Carmelites, where they had imprisoned you — I was then aspiring to the honours of the Church — just like yourself. I was leading you to my ladder of ropes on the wall where good old Friar Martino trained his choicest figs, and you were as reluctant to follow me as if it had been to leave paradise, weeping and turning your proud, snowy neck toward the convent walls — what could I do but promise? But was it for an intellect like yours, which unites the greatest qualities of men's even with the most passionate and wayward of women's, to believe me — or to think that Heaven would ratify an oath which would make us perjurers to itself?"

"But hell at least has confirmed it, Ferrando! You have thrown off the priestly shackles of which a bribed pontiff has too willingly absolved you. You are on your way, if your soul quail not before the awful deed, to that empire which I was to have shared, and which another is to mount with you — but you err, Ferrando, you err, else you know me not! I swear to you that she shall never be yours, that she shall never share with you that throne which you are planning to mount by the most

matchless treachery. Oh, how I hate you — how I hate you!”

The duke glanced in the direction of the witches, whom he suspected or knew to be listening, and softened his voice to a degree which made it impossible for them to understand the words with which he soothed the excited girl.

“Yea, my Francesca, soul of my soul! I have mounted, and ever by your means, until nothing but the highest remains to be attained!” He paused and fixed his eyes upon her with passionate and mournful expression. “And would you dash me back into darkness, dispel the visions of my dream just as they are about to change into brilliant reality? Would you — and why? You have allowed yourself to be overcome by an unreasoning jealousy, fit only to be entertained by the lowest of your sex, above whom your glorious and heroic spirit has ever set you, when you ought to glory in the knowledge that this soul is yours, yours for time and eternity, and has never wavered in its faith.”

“Traitor! Matchless traitor!” exclaimed Francesca, wildly. “But I will not pass away without my vengeance, and then I only wish that I might sink back into that state of oblivion from which I have been evoked only to suffer.”

“What can you do, Francesca?” said the duke, with a smile. “If I had feared your vengeance on this your imaginary rival, if I had not known — that even seeing her beauty you must know — that my soul, which had been twined in fire with yours, could never mingle with another — if I really loved her, deem you that I would have trusted her alone in this city during mine absence without command to keep you in reality a prisoner, since you are one only in name?”

"And are you assured that your command would have been obeyed?" exclaimed Francesca, pressing both hands against her bosom, as if to repress its violent heavings. "Have I not brought you hither by a spell, you cruel, unmerciful betrayer? And could not one of equal power have rescued me from your castle and your Spaniards' clutches?"

"Now, by St. Peter, I swear I believe that you have a spell and one irresistible," returned the duke, seizing the indignant girl and clutching her in his fierce embrace, despite her struggles and wrath. "But you do love me," he continued, in soothing tones; "have you not lost heaven itself for me? Are you not the talisman of my power? For without your love to reward, your zeal to second, your courage to prompt, would I not be still a whimpering priest, a whining monk, cursing the altars at which he kneels? Moreover, my love, you are so wholly mine that you cannot in any way harm me without harming yourself a thousandfold."

"And what could your power — all mankind — do against me?" said the girl, with a smile of supernatural despair. "What if I had yielded to the impulse that urged me on, as with an angel's fiery sword, to rush from my prison and to proclaim your crimes in the presence of all the Italian world now assembled within these gates? They would have believed me!"

"And what would they have believed? It is indeed not altogether incredible that a priest might err, or that a youthful nun might discover that the blood in her veins flowed somewhat warmer than melting ice," replied the duke, tranquilly. "But should you revive an ancient charge against me, you know, who would gainsay you?"

"To shelter you from the just retribution for your crimes, to baffle the vengeance of my noble kinsman,"

replied Francesca, vehemently. "Ah, what heavier vengeance could you imprecate upon my guilty head! Ah, aged Lesina, thy curse is now exhausted. Hopeless days and sleepless nights, terror and remorse — despair and desolation for ever around me! Oh! Needed it but this, your last, irrevocable treason, betrayer, to fill to overflowing the cup of my bitterness?"

"Wherefore, then, did you not tarry in the convent, whence I took you, for another, to whom you could have given yourself with less remorse?" replied the duke, darkening into livid pallor. "I trow, if all the truth were known, the fruit was ripe for the gathering, and it was but a question into whose lap it was to fall."

"You say not this to me, Ferrando, as meaning it — you do not, you dare not!" exclaimed Francesca, shrinking back, while the pallor of death overspread her features, and her eyes sparkled with an almost supernatural glow. "But it is impossible — O God, let this at least be impossible! Ferrando, I but desired your presence here to tell you how I hated, loathed, despised you! To bid you farewell for ever!"

"Shall we remove the image, daughter, or close it up in the marble, as the wizard bade us, to preserve thy lover ever loving and bring him continually back to thine arms, like a bird to its nest?" said Moira, with a hideous grin of scorn and malice, her serpent eyes overflowing with fiendish delight and cunning.

The duke turned toward the interrogator, with a deep and grotesque bow.

"Your pardon, fascinating graces, for not previously baring my head to your worshipful presence! But what say you, love, my own Francesca — what shall the grisly mothers do?" The duke turned from the witches to his

beautiful victim, gazing upon her with eyes fraught with fire.

Shame and passion, pride and disdain, struggled for some instants in his captive's haughty bosom, and alternately whitened and crimsoned her beautiful face, like the rose and snowy lights of an Alpine sunset. But it was not hard to predict which emotion would ultimately triumph in her tempestuous spirit, and as she sank in an agony of shame and love into her betrayer's arms, the weird sisters seemed in need of no further instruction.

While Ferrando of Altamura poured forth a torrent of passionate assurances and loving upbraidings of her doubts, the two sisters, muttering diverse recondite spells, proceeded to cover the sarcophagus with a lid which seemed to belong to it. When this was completed, the older of the hags melted some lead in an earthen pot filled with naphtha, after which they proceeded to solder up the sarcophagus with many additional rites and ceremonies.

"You triumph, Ferrando, you triumph, but you know me not! I desire to be henceforth only your friend, — your adviser, if you will, but your love — nevermore!" started the girl, with a new outbreak of womanly wrath and shame. Then she continued: "Leave me now! My heart is sufficiently comforted; I have seen you, I know you do not hate me — 'tis enough. Return to your palazzo and leave me to my lonely anguish. I will watch you to the gates from my tower, and as the last torch vanishes within I shall know that, although another awaits your coming, you are remembering that here, in the halls of my father's palace, you first did behold me, an innocent child at my grandsire's feet, wreathing in careless joy a garland of flowers to deck the gray hairs which I was to bring to the grave with sorrow and disgrace."

Even the duke was touched by this melancholy recollection.

"Nay, my love, my own Francesca! Even by the memory that still haunts me of that enchanting past, I shall not leave you until you have sworn to love me as wholly and faithfully as you did then," he said, vehemently. "And hear me, when in return I pledge myself by all my hopes of empire and greatness — the hour is nigh when you shall indeed be nearer to me than ever, in very truth my queen and — Empress of Italy!"

Weeping, but listening not unsoothed to the flattering sounds, Francesca murmured some scarcely articulate words to the busy hags, to which they nodded assent. With an irresolute glance at the duke, she yet suffered him to follow her in the ascent of the pillar, but so rapidly did she precede him that, not being accustomed to its giddy rotations, he was left considerably in the rear.

On reaching the summit the duke encountered Crivello with a torch, but Francesca had vanished.

"Where is the lady? Has she not passed you, Crivello?" he exclaimed.

"No, signor, no!" returned the Catalan, much startled. "Yet I have been awaiting your Excellency for a long and tedious hour."

"This is most singular," said the duke, with a momentary feeling of superstitious awe. "It would almost seem that she has discovered the secret of walking invisible, and yet, in truth, there must needs be some magic in her spell, for hardly in the maddest days of my love for her did her coyish pranks prove as irksome to me as now. I will not leave the torre till I have found her."

"'Tis looking in vain, signor, if she is bent on the contrary," said Crivello. "But I must needs remind

your Excellency of the great company which awaits you — ”

“ State affairs have detained me ! Lend me your torch ! This capricious girl shall not thus sport with the flames she has aroused,” returned the duke, impatiently, and, snatching the torch, he began his exploration with an eagerness and perseverance which yielded only after long and fruitless efforts to Crivello’s convictions of its uselessness.

It was easily ascertained that Francesca could not have retired to her own apartments, for none of the sentinels, whom she must have passed, had seen the least sign of such an apparition.

“ She has indeed discovered a spell which, by our Lady, had she known it earlier, might have kept me enslaved long ere it did befall,” said the duke, with an air of vexation. “ But look to it, captain, that I find her in sight at my next visit, or I shall deem that you are in the trick too. And bid her summon her wizard, that he may match his skill with mine, for he must needs be great in a science of which I am curious. Why stare you so at me with your stony eyes ? Learn to obey without thinking, else Satan may pinch you with ten thousand red-hot pincers ! Let us begone ! Crivello — I appoint you castellan of the torre ! ”

And while the abashed Catalan was bowing his silent acknowledgments, the duke unwillingly prepared to quit the gloomy passages of the Torre del Diavolo.

CHAPTER VI.

FAVARA

FEVERED with agitation and ruminating on the events of the day, with mind and feelings so hopelessly perplexed that he did not even note the conspicuous absence of Canaletto, Ottorino returned to the palace of Khalesa. The sea shone with the glory of the setting sun, the air was calm, and the white surf, tinged with the crimson of sunset, broke lightly on the sands. But the Lombard heeded not the dazzling splendour of his surroundings, not the massy barriers of mountains beyond, with forests rising from their base, and precipices frowning over the forests, nor the fleecy clouds resting on their summits, reddened with the reflection of the west. A thousand and one thoughts, desires, and fears, as new to him as their force seemed overwhelming, rushed through his brain. At last then he had met face to face the lady of Miraval, — and the spell of her beauty was upon him.

Without a spice of the vanity of the coxcomb in his lofty and austere character, the Lombard could yet not have failed to observe that Helena di Miraval's eyes had discoursed to him something warmer than the gratitude due to a deliverer even from so great a peril. Again and again he recalled to memory every trait of that exquisite face, the lovely mouth, the dark, fathomless eyes, and he felt himself irresistibly drawn toward the enchantress.

But then the fatal rumours current about the kinswoman of the Duke of Altamura pressed their sharp thorn deeply into his heart. The sudden and mysterious demise of the lady of Miraval's apparently most favoured suitors was not the outgrowth of a lying chronicler's fancy, who for the turn of an epigram, or to give his sonnet an acuter sting, would have blackmailed the devil himself. The tale of Azzo of Gioja, who, persisting in his suit, was found strangled on the steps of the cathedral, after having ignored the warning conveyed to him in a golden ewer, revealing a skull when he uncovered the dish, — this was more than the idle tale of varlets and drunken condottieri to shorten the watch at a camp-fire.

In the sway of these conflicting emotions, in this struggle between love and fear, Ottorino conceived a project which was fully in keeping with the ideas of his land and his own frame of mind, but which was probably not uninfluenced by the superstitious feeling to which the associations of his whole life had subjected even his powerful intellect. The thought occurred to him to seek the presence of the Dominican, stating to him the doubts which filled his mind in regard to the duke, under pretence of learning the latter's position in the new Ghibelline state. A look or even a gesture of the monk might throw more light into the darkness than any words he was likely to speak. And he felt that he dared not trust himself in the presence of either the duke or the lady till he had set his mind at rest, for fear lest he should betray the secret of his heart.

Without confiding his intent to any one, and so carefully guarding his secret that he even disdained to inquire the direction of the Dominican's habitation, Ottorino set out on foot to find the latter's abode.

The night was sultry but clear. The moon had risen

high in the heavens as the Visconti traversed the romantic wilderness surrounding the palace of Khalesa. Here were no trained trees and hedges, all was free and unrestrained nature, lavish and thriving without the aid of man. Not even the paths betrayed the least care in their preservation. Huge plane-trees lifted their heads above holm-oaks and gnarled quinces, and the broad-leafed fig glistened by the side of the gray-green olive. A wild confusion of brushwood and creepers bordered the narrow path; ivy, periwinkle, and acanthus entangled the giants of the wood with almost inextricable network. Maiden-hair hung in luxurious tufts above myrtles and bays, and sombre evergreen contrasted, as light and shadow, with the brilliant centifolia. The whole plant world of a tropical clime held here its intoxicating orgy, while deep in the recesses of the enchanting wilderness, like the palace of a magician, built of liquid silver, rose with its marble shafts and glittering cupolas the Moorish palace of Favara.

Like a miniature paradise, such as the fantastic Moslem mind conceived it, the magnificent gardens of Almenani and Favara encircled their fairy kiosks with murmuring fountains, lawns intersected by walls of blossoming shrubs, groves of camellias and azaleas, and airy groups of bamboos, the lanceolated foliage of which shivered in the soft night wind like supple ribbons of brilliant metallic green. The dream-palace itself was surrounded by rose gardens, exhibiting specimens of every known variety against a background of almond-trees in full bloom, while an incongruous profusion of flowers cast their intoxicating perfumes amid the interlacing branches, forming a natural trellised roof overhead. Pink and white myrtles, golden-hued jonquils, rainbow-tinted chrysanthemums, purple rhododendrons,

irises, lilacs, and magnolias mixed their odours in an almost intoxicating perfume, while rare orchids raised their glowing petals with tropical gorgeousness in the moonlight.

The sky was radiant, and the magic lustre of a great white moon, hanging like an alabaster lamp in the deep blue overhead, invaded the sombre bosquets of Favara, and lit the trellised rose-walks to the marble palace, casting into bold relief against the deep shadows of palm and ilex the many feathery jets of water which rose and fell with whispers of coolness in the flower-filled basins of alabaster.

Ottorino gazed in silent admiration upon this now deserted wonder-world, then slowly continuing upon his way, he entered the deep solitude of a grove formed of blooming oleander and magnolias, amidst which, at frequent intervals, glittered the spray of Arabian fountains in the moonlight.

“Can paradise be more lovely?” he murmured, as, oblivious of his goal, he paused to survey the scene. “Is there a spot on earth more beautiful than this enchanted wood? It calls forth in the soul the wish for some one to love, some one to confide in —”

He paused, and with face pale and anxious gazed long and intently at the stars, while the rays of the moon broke on the playful waters of the cascade and tinged with silver the breathless foliage of the cypress-trees. And his heart whispered a name to his lips, a name so sweet, so passionately loved, that he longed to cry it out to the stars above, to the pale, silent moon, that shed her mysterious radiance over the fantastic plumage of trees waving in the dreamy night air, then through the enchanted stillness floated trembling, as if in dread of its own sound, as if in dread of the slumbering echoes

that might whisper it to dreaming flower and tree, the name:

“Helena! Helena!”

“What fairy answers to this invocation?” a voice, which strangely thrilled his whole being, said, closely by his side, and before him, both hands extended, her matchlessly beautiful face uplifted, and with the inscrutable, velvety eyes fixed upon his own, stood Helena di Miraval.

For a moment the Lombard gazed speechlessly into the eyes that held his own with their magic spell. Then, not daring to touch the proffered hands, he faltered:

“Nay, — if fairy it be, she hath indeed acknowledged the spell, and her presence removes the sting of remorse for my unwitting intrusion into her realms.”

“I lord not this domain, which I but invaded in quest of a knowledge I would fain acquire, if it be within human ken to satisfy the thirst that consumes my soul,” said Helena di Miraval. “Stranger that you are in Palermo, it may be unknown to you that in this abode dwells Ben Hussein, the astrologer, — the familiar of the old emperor and of Manfred, the king.”

“Then you came to consult the stars?” Ottorino faltered, almost revealing his kindred intent. “But may not the fairy of Favara divine events to come without aid of astrologer or wizard?”

The lady of Miraval shook her beautiful head, while a smile, intoxicating yet strangely imbued with a tinge of sadness, hovered around her lips.

“Alas — even the present is to her a mystery, which it lies but in the power of him to solve who is lord of its key. But since by fate or chance we meet again, here and at this hour, let me again thank you for the life you have saved, a gift made doubly precious bestowed by your hands!”

Ottorino bent over the beautiful white hands extended to him, and pressed his lips upon them in fervent ecstasy. Then raising his eyes, he gazed upon her with a sense of mingled dread and worship, as one might look upon an idol, too high removed for love, and yet demanding divine adoration. Then, seized by an hysterical passion beyond his control, forgetful of all consequences, forgetful of his own resolves, he spoke in a voice filled with emotion:

“Helena — Helena! The man to whom love has been but as a sealed book has met his fate! What shall I say to you but that I worship you with all the strength of my life, that I love you so deeply that I am afraid to think of it, that I love you with a passion I dare not dwell upon, too well, too madly for my own peace. Forgive the madness that has broken all barriers of restraint, the frenzy which mocks alike at studied hour and phrase — I love you, I love you!”

Benumbed by his own daring, he paused, trembling, breathless.

Not a sound echoed through the long cypress avenues of Favara, only amidst groves of myrtle and aloe the nightingale sang her song of love.

Helena's eyes were alight with a strange lustre, which seemed not love as much as fear, and her very lips paled at Ottorino's passionate outburst.

“Did it then come so suddenly?” she whispered, almost inaudibly. “Did it then come so suddenly?”

“As sudden as fate and as resistless,” the Lombard replied. “I had not loved till the hour we met, when the god in my heart leaped forth to greet the god in your eyes, and as certain as you are the first woman to whom Ottorino Visconti has spoken words of love, as certain

will you be the only one that he will love to his life's end."

He paused, drawing a deep breath, while with the silent yet irresistible magnetism of her eyes she held his gaze. The same bewildering, intoxicating siren smile played around Helena di Miraval's beautiful mouth, while she regarded him with strangely musing glances.

"You say you love me," she said, slowly, and with singular trepidation, "and yet you do not know me! You tell me you love me in the face of my beauty's fatal spell, whose fame had reached your ears long ere your eyes gazed into mine. What certainty is yours that I am not toying with you, how know you that I came not hither to elicit from your lips the confession I read at our first meeting in your eyes, as I read therein the horror when by the duke's gentle address my identity was revealed to you? How know you that I am not here to lure you on to that abyss of darkness wherein lie rotting Helena di Miraval's countless lovers — nay, look not so frightened! You did not trust me then — why trust me now? I saw you start — so did the duke!"

She paused, noting the deadly pallor that had overspread the Lombard's features; then, freeing her hands, she faced him in the whole splendour of her unrivalled beauty. As he made no response, she continued, softly:

"For the life you have bestowed on Helena di Miraval, let her give you another in return. Fly, Visconti — fly from Palermo — as if the plague were on your heels. Too long have you tarried even now. Abandon your suit and forget her who is unworthy of a love so exalted, but who will always remember her noble preserver."

Ottorino had gradually recovered his self-possession, of which the lady of Miraval's speech had almost de-

prived him, but a strained look came into his eyes as he replied :

"I care not to lift the veil that enshrines your heart, Helena! I ask not what brought you hither; whether it was the fervent prayer of my soul, or chance, or fate. I love you, love you so, that if your decree turns light into darkness I shall not appeal to the future hour. If you cannot love me as I do you, say so now! I cannot share your love with another! I want you all my own, every beat of your heart, every fibre of your being, every atom of your soul! Palermo I will not leave — unless it be with you! I have laid at your feet all I call my own, and in your hands, Helena, you hold the threads of my destiny!"

There was an austere loftiness in his speech that went straight to the woman's heart. Softly and entreatingly the words came from her lips, and as she spoke Ottorino again clasped the firm white hands within his own, listening to her speech in a delirium of ecstasy.

"You will not heed my warning — listen to my words, Ottorino," she said, dwelling on his name, as if it reluctantly parted from her lips. "The duke, my kinsman, has plans of his own, plans regarding myself which I tremble even to surmise. Have you the courage to love me in the face of what awaits us if the duke should discover our attachment before we could place ourselves beyond the reach of his dire temper, and in the face of what the world has said and will continue to say of Helena di Miraval?"

"Say but that you love me, and I will believe you against the whole world!" the Lombard stammered, passionately, as with gentle force he drew her down to a seat beside him.

"I love you," she whispered, with her arms about him,

"I loved you from the moment when your gaze of lofty pride fell upon me,—when opening mine eyes from the trance I gazed into those of my preserver! And you no longer dread this fatal spell of mine, which has wrought such havoc among the fluttering hearts of men,—you fear not to lose me just at the moment when our happiness seems most complete?"

"I do fear," he replied, "and who, that truly loves, does not? But I fear not you, my Helena, only for you!"

A dreamy radiance lingered in her beautiful eyes as she responded to his caresses. Not a sound broke the quiet of the hour save the monotonous plaint of an owl among the leafy boughs. The old oaks wove a carpet of shadows around them, changing the patterns of its tissue constantly upon the velvety moss-ground; the magnolias distilled their perfume through the still shade; the soft breeze of night had gone down, and the smooth surface of the lake lay like a shield of molten gold, reflecting the light of the planet that rules our dreams.

At last Helena broke the silence.

"How beautiful is the hour!" she said, dreamily. "It seems as if a disembodied spirit walked through our hearts, a spirit that has seen all worlds and shared in all sufferings."

"Helena," Ottorino replied, passionately, "the gift of a woman's love, such as yours, has been the dream, the ambition, of my life! Forgive me, impetuous as I am, for having forced my confession upon you in this hour! Life is too short to curtail one moment of happiness from the years full of care which are most men's lot. Since I have set eyes upon you, I can imagine no life, only death, separated from you. It seems to me that you must always have been with me from the be-

ginning — we were destined to find each other, even with worlds between us!”

They sat for some moments without speaking. Ottorino could have remained so for ever, gazing with rapture on her half-averted face, beaming with such divine beauty, and all aglow with the happy consciousness of his ardent admiration. She seemed as beautiful as a goddess, and in his heart, if not on his knees, he bent in worship almost idolatrous. And Ottorino Visconti, who in the almost incessant broils of the past decade had faced death in every form, trembled at the side of this most beautiful woman as he had never trembled before. He held the hands that lay unresistingly in his in a tender clasp. He pressed them to his lips, he sought to divine by their magnetic touch his impending fate. Helena's face was still averted, suffused with an unseen blush, yet she felt a wild joy which no art of dissimulation could conceal flashing and leaping in her bosom, as he whispered his fervent appeals into her ears. At last she raised her dark, impassioned eyes to his, and their souls met and embraced in one long and wistful look of silent recognition.

“I love you — I love you,” she stammered, while he kissed her eyes and mouth in a wild ecstasy of joy.

The words had hardly left her lips when a sudden crash of thunder rolled over their heads and went pealing down the lake and the distant valley, while a black cloud suddenly eclipsed the moon, obscuring her silvery rays and shedding darkness over the landscape.

Helena uttered a cry of dismay, while, startled and frightened, she clung to Ottorino for protection, as the angry reverberations rolled away in the distant forests.

“Ottorino,” she faltered, “it is as if a dreadful voice had spoken — an omen of evil.”

"It is but a sudden thunder-storm, and we had better seek a sheltering roof. We love each other, Helena, and hell itself may not frown on us."

"I would love you just the same if all the powers of doom were arrayed against us," she replied. "And who knows — but what they may be?"

But they had not much time for talking, for in ever denser masses black clouds came rolling over the horizon, coming lower and lower, touching the very earth. Every now and then the clouds were rent and split with vivid flashes of lightning, while the rising wind overpowered with its roaring the thunder that pealed momentarily nearer and nearer.

"Let us seek shelter in the kiosk," said Ottorino, "the storm will not be long," and, starting down the path, they reached the quaint Moorish structure just as a blinding flash of lightning was followed by an almost deafening peal of thunder. Helena clung to Ottorino amidst the tempest of wind and the moving darkness; they caught occasional glimpses of each other when the lightning rent the gloom which had crept over the slumbering world around. They had barely reached the kiosk when the rain came down in broad, heavy splashes, while the uproar of the elements seemed to efface every outline of creation.

Be it that she guessed her lover's thoughts which his tremulous gestures and the fire in his eyes betrayed, be it that she feared to be alone with him in this solitary retreat, Helena's manner suddenly grew colder and more reserved. She endeavoured to change that rhapsody of burning eloquence, sweet though it was to her heart, in which Ottorino atoned for the intermittent silence. But the apprehensions which dictated this change of demeanour were in themselves dangerously suggestive.

The Lombard's words became strangely vague and random. He continued to gaze with a kind of fierceness upon Helena, while half in fear, half in hope of restraining his impetuous ardour, she tried to win from him the assurance that he would conceal his love for her from the duke.

"You will require all your love for me, all your faith and circumspection, to evade his snares," she said, falteringly. "Think not of it lightly! I cannot always be with you, and once you allow your faith to waver we are both lost, — you and I! And since you love me with a love strong, passionate, and unchangeable as my own, oh, do not mistrust me, Ottorino! Do not doubt me even in the face of my having obeyed but my woman's heart in surrendering to you that which was your own!"

"I love you and I trust you!" he replied, pressing a long, passionate kiss upon her lips, a kiss which seemed to mingle their beings into one.

For a moment she abandoned herself to his caresses, resistlessly and with eyes closed in ecstasy, then, releasing herself, she rose abruptly.

"Swear, then, to leave me on the instant, Ottorino," she said, standing apart from him. "I am all yours, but do not debase your love to be the thing her calumniators have called her. The storm is subsiding and I must return before my absence is discovered. Do not attempt to follow me — I came not hither entirely alone," she concluded, with a bewitching smile. "But my attendants are discreet, and no mortal ear has dishallowed the sanctity of this hour!"

Again Ottorino grasped her hands.

"Nay — you shall not thus leave me," he stammered, "mocking with your absence the longing of my heart — you shall not leave me till my soul has assurance of its

idol's response to its impassioned call! Why am I to avoid you? Why must I conceal a worship whose goal is but the honour and happiness of its object? Is Helena di Miraval not free to love according to the dictates of her own proud heart? What have we to fear from the duke? Let rather him beware how he crosses our path!"

Helena di Miraval regarded the Lombard with the same inscrutable gaze of her fathomless eyes, while a smile lingered on her lips.

"The seed of doubt is sprouting even now in your heart," she said, softly. "How will it be when I am not with you? Little you know of the duke, of his dark intents, and of the strange power he wields over me; a spell which only love and faith unwavering can break. Ask no more — not now — not here! I dread the very air! I love you, but it were perilous for you to seek me out; trust yourself not alone in this city after this hour, and stray not as near the duke's palace, as a dove to the nest of an eagle. You are brave — but all bravery were useless against the bravo's steel." She paused for a moment as if lost in thought, then, noting the strained and puzzled look which had passed into his eyes, she extended her hands to him. "I must leave you now," she said, softly. "Too long have I tarried; but — if you would have tidings from me — be to-morrow at vespers at the Convent of Santa Lucia. Do you trust me, Ottorino?"

"Forgive me —" he faltered. "It is all so strange to me, — do not play with me, — Helena!"

"I love you," she replied, while her eyes seemed to hold his own with their subtle spell, and her fingers gently returned the pressure of the hands that held hers. "Time will set all clear between us, and all that

I fear even to whisper under this sky shall be known to you!"

The storm had by this time subsided almost as suddenly as it had broken, and a few stars began to twinkle here and there in the transparent sky. Ottorino guided Helena's steps through the purple dusk which pervaded the kiosk, into the gardens, filled again with glittering rays of moonlight. The rain-drops, trembling on leaves and boughs, sparkled like thousands of diamonds, and the fresh odours from the rain-washed flowers perfumed the air.

At the entrance of a cypress avenue, where fork-like the path branched off in three directions, they paused. Helena laid her hands on Ottorino's shoulders, while she gazed intently and passionately into his eyes.

"And now, my friend, farewell!" she said, slowly, and with trembling accents. "To-morrow at dusk, at the convent of Santa Lucia,—and," she added, with a smile, "mark well the sun-dial on the turret of Abdurrhaman!"

Once more the Lombard clasped her passionately to his heart; once more their lips met in one long ecstatic kiss, then Helena gently released herself from his encircling arms, and a moment later she had disappeared in the hazy distance of the cypress avenue.

For some time Ottorino stood where Helen had left him, gazing, as one in a trance, in the direction whence she had disappeared. So absorbed was his mood that he perceived not the slowly approaching form of a man in Saracenic attire, who, muttering strangely to himself, had emerged from the copse.

Ben Hussein, the astrologer of the court of Palermo, was a man much below the common size of his race. He was small, spare, and slightly hunchbacked, yet in his

presence and mien there was something before which the proudest noble bowed in submission, something that seemed to tower above even the majesty of royalty. He walked with light and noiseless step, as if his foot spurned to tread the earth. In the carriage of his head there was something of so indefinable and imposing a dignity that he inspired that feeling of awe so inseparably connected with the profession in which he had become an adept.

When Ottorino, startled from his reverie by a dark shadow flitting across his path, beheld the bent form of the Moor, he at once divined his profession by the magic signs and characters emblazoned upon the latter's snow-white turban and upon his girdle, and his former intent reverted to him.

"I greet thee," he said, in response to the Saracen's mute salutation, "and my heart rejoices at finding in these solitudes one possessed of the power to unveil the mysteries which baffle our mind, when the soul, finding its earthly prison too narrow, would fain take its flight into spheres which are but a sealed book for us, were it not for the wisdom of thy kind!"

"It was even for revealing this science that Harut and Marut were confined by Allah — blessed be his name — in the walls of Babel," replied the astrologer, glancing wistfully at the Lombard. "Thou wouldst inquire into the decrees of those bright, heavenly bodies, thou wouldst know if they promise fulfilment of thy hopes? The stars acknowledge no pity; passionless they look down upon our joys and our sorrows, but whatever there is written therein, that will be fulfilled."

"Nay," Ottorino interposed, beseechingly, "since thou hast not reproved my presence in these thy solitudes, grant the prayer of my soul. I shall accept the decrees

of the stars without fear, and, if it needs must be, without hope!"

"The end is in the throes of its beginning: at Castel del Monte we meet again!"

Ere Ottorino had divined the intent of the astrologer, the latter had disappeared in the copse. Pondering over his strange words, the Lombard slowly began to retrace his steps toward Kholesa.

The night-wind rustled among the fragrant leaves of the citron and pomegranate. The silver tinkling of a cascade, hidden in groves of luxuriant and tropical foliage, chimed melodiously through the verdant wilderness, and Ottorino Visconti disappeared in the night, carrying his dreaming heart along the mystic road of destiny.

CHAPTER VII.

COUNT LANDULF OF TRENT

A GORGEOUS train of barons, nobles, prelates, and knights poured through the portals of the imperial Hohenstaufen palace into the Sala Regia. Between marshals and heralds and halberdiers, between Nubian slaves and Saracenic guards, between Moors in fantastic garbs and eunuchs, whose stealthy, noiseless steps were lost amidst the spur-clashing tread of the imperial guards, the whole pomp and procession passed on in due marshalry, entering the magnificent council-hall at almost the same time that Manfred descended from the grand marble stairway at its extremity. He was accompanied by the dignitaries of the realm, and followed by yet larger groups of gilded officials, officers of illustrious rank, lay and clerical, prelates from remote lands, princes, abbots, grand masters of the chief orders of knighthood, monks, pages, guardsmen, and eunuchs.

Ottorino's anxiety to behold face to face the man who had dictated his terms to three pontiffs, under whose banners the Ghibellines had vanquished the party of the Guelphs, was so great that he took care to retain his station in the very front ranks of the assembly.

It needed not the gorgeous robes of royalty, stiff with costly gems, nor the ponderous mantle of cloth of gold; it needed not the blazing circlet of Tancred, the last of

the Norman kings, nor the flambeau of the Hohenstaufen, to discern the person of Manfred, the glorious son of Emperor Frederick the Second. With the majesty of Charlemagne, with the grace of an Apollo, he faced the assembly. A tremendous shout of triumphal greeting went up from thousands and thousands of voices within the Sala and without, when their eyes beheld their beloved leader, the son of a prince who had been their idol.

Ottorino's heart went out at once to the Prince of Taranto, as had the hearts of Manfred's Apulian and Sicilian subjects. This, then, was the hero who had torn from the clutches of papacy the legacy left to him by an undaunted sire; this the champion who had restored peace and prosperity among the Italian states; this the one who had extinguished the flaming torch of war, which mortal hatred and relentless passions had tossed over the divided and unhappy provinces, once the constituent parts of the great Roman empire. And the scion of the Visconti of Milan could not but admit to himself that no fitter ruler of the Southlands, no fitter leader of the great Ghibelline confederacy, could have been chosen than Manfred, Prince of Taranto.

The great procession of the envoys came to an instantaneous halt upon discovering the approach of the king. The Duke of Altamura, emerging from the plumed throng, advanced up the passage cleared for him to the place where a dark and sinister-visaged noble seemed to gaze absently on the glittering pomp. The duke took the Count of Caserta familiarly by the arm, and with him proceeded toward the royal dais. The duke looked pale, but his eyes glittered and his manner was so hurriedly vivacious that it formed a striking contrast to the austere demeanour of Caserta. A smile, open and frank, hovered

on Manfred's lips as he extended his hands in welcome and greeting. The Duke of Altamura, kneeling on the golden cushion placed by the master of ceremonies before the throne, paid his homage to his sovereign. The duke performed the ceremonial hastily, while heralds enjoined silence throughout the hall, which was filled with constant buzzing and trampling. A hundred ushers in glittering liveries echoed the cry, and the noise ceased.

After having offered like homage to Helena of Epirus, Manfred's beautiful queen, who, surrounded by her ladies of honour, had taken her station upon an estrada almost beside her husband, the duke offered thanks for the gracious welcome.

"The Ghibellines of Italy assembled within the hospitable gates of the royal city join me in the sincere wishes that the peace, the conclusion of which they journeyed hither to celebrate, may endure, and an era of prosperity dawn upon the kingdom of Sicily, unbroken for generations to come."

Amidst the profound silence Manfred replied, not without a tinge of emotion in his tones:

"Even until now, Signor Duca, have we been well content with your services, and we receive with much satisfaction this expression of your good-will toward us, of your continued loyalty to our house. The throne of Sicily needs not additional dominions to exalt its majesty, but truly for princes to acknowledge its greatness and to sustain it in the respect of others, we ask none better than yourself."

The Count of Caserta, husband to the king's sister, Violanthe, was next in line of advance. As he was in the act of bending his knees in homage, Manfred instantly raised and kissed him on both cheeks, to the great scandal of Signor Pedretti, the master of ceremonies.

"Welcome, thrice welcome, count, from the jaws of Scylla and Charybdis," the king said, with a warmth under which even the stolid countenance of Caserta seemed to melt. Emotions of pride and sorrow seemed to struggle for the mastery, and he retreated precipitately. Ottorino's gaze now fell upon a personage whose features and bearing at once attracted his attention. The Duke of Alifé, high chancellor of the realm, who was now addressing the king, was a hunchback about fifty years of age. From beneath a black, square cap there fell upon his sunken temples two locks of auburn hair, tinged slightly with gray. A thin and pale face ended in a sharp, pointed chin, on which, whenever the chancellor spoke, there wagged a stiff beard, cut short after the Spanish fashion and of the same colour as his hair. Two small green eyes glared from beneath scant eyebrows, with an expression which was hard to analyze. Their gaze seemed always to avoid the person addressed, only to be stealthily fixed upon him unawares. Cruelty and craftiness seemed to constitute the main characteristics of that pale face with its pursed-up mouth. Like an evil gnome the chancellor moved between the towering statures of the Apulian barons, and Ottorino uttered an involuntary sigh of relief after he had vanished before the approach of the chief Apulian nobility. One by one they now passed the royal dais, Giordano and Galvano Lancia, Conrad and Marino Capece, Lords of Atropaldo; Frederick, Prince of Antioch, stepbrother of Manfred; Drogo, the high admiral; Count Anselm of Cerra, Grand Chamberlain; Giordano d'Anglone, John of Procida, Conrad Benincasa, the Counts of Falconara, Aquino, Suessa, San Germano, San Severino, Cantazarro, Fasanello, Mora, and the protonotaries of the kingdom, Anselm of Suzzara and Robert of Bari.

In vain Ottorino's searching gaze swept the hall in quest of the gaunt figure of Landulf of Trent; the German leader was remarked by his absence, but the Lombard was roused from his abstracted reverie by the speech of Manfred, addressed to the Duke of Altamura, who had taken his station to the right of the royal dais:

"And who is yonder knight who contents himself with the sun emanating from our crown, and courts not closer approach?"

Responding to a silent nod from the duke, Ottorino approached.

"Ottorino of the ducal house of Visconti, Lords of Milan and Imperial Viceroys of Lombardy," he said, while going through the prescribed ceremony.

"Milan and the Golden Viper! How fares our kinsman Matteo — the old duke?"

"He sorely regrets that his old enemy, the gout, holds him fast within the circuit of his castle, thus preventing him from paying his personal devoir to the prince he holds most high of the imperial house of Suabia."

"None more welcome in Palermo than a Visconti!" Manfred replied, extending his hand.

"I thank the king's Majesty. The sword and lance of the house of Visconti will ever be at the command of the glorious son of our beloved and lamented emperor." Then, bowing low, the Lombard fell back, while the procession slowly passed the royal dais, Manfred favouring each envoy with a gracious smile, which failed not to produce its effect even upon the grim and war-worn countenance of the representatives of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice.

"An imposing spectacle," remarked the Duke of Modica, who was watching it with keen interest, to the Count of Caserta. "Are the ashes of the old Roman

empire to be rekindled once more, and is the vision of Ben Hussein after all more than a dream?"

The Count of Caserta smiled disdainfully.

"To be a Roman," he said, with a slight tinge of contempt, "it was an honour once when the Coliseum stood, ere the Gothic fathers of Spain beheld it. But where is Count Landulf of Trent?"

"His thousand lanzknechts were chiefly the cause of the broil which caused the duke to place his own men upon the walls," interposed the Count of Chiaramonte.

"Say you so?" exclaimed Modica, with strong and evidently unpleasant surprise.

"The Germans are proud, and their nostrils resent Saracenic odours!"

Modica shrugged his shoulders.

"'Tis perchance as well! I trust the knave not over-much, though the king swears by him. Do you remember the strange words he uttered in the camp before Andria?"

"He was in his passion, and it was a helmet full of the thick wine of that country that spoke out of the thick-headed scullion," remarked the Duke of Gravina.

"And the Lords Frangipani are indeed good testimony, for they were all around him when he was expounding the rights to the succession in Apulia of the youth Conradino."

"It were a step most ill-advised," Caserta interposed, with a sinister smile.

"The Abbot of Constanz, his tutor, will initiate the youth in the history of his house! It will make him sad and pensive!"

"And keep his iron hosts beyond the Adige?"

"Who knows what strange temptations may befall!"

"Temptations for the living—peace for the dead," a strange, croaking voice, evil-boding as that of a raven,

replied, and the Apulians faced the sneering countenance of John of Alifé.

"Dead? Who is dead?" several exclaimed at once, staring aghast at the hunchback, who never more in his life than at this moment resembled a spirit of evil evoked from the nether world for the perpetration of some deed of darkness.

"Conradino has passed from the realms of the living," the chancellor replied, with a mock bow to his audience. "A special envoy brought the fateful tidings. Think you the king can be consoled?"

John of Alifé's sneer changed to an expression of surprise as his gaze fell on the piazza below.

"What means this concourse? Have the tidings spread to the city?"

"They seem to be Suabian knights, to judge by their crests and long spears."

A contingent of cavalry, fully armed and equipped, was indeed drawn up in a solid square, under the command of their subaltern officers, but the leader of this select and much desired body of men was not to be seen. Their visors were raised; their countenances, stolid and immobile, might have evinced mourning or discontentment.

"Verily — whoever glories in the possession of these lances will rule Italy!" remarked the Count of Modica, with a gesture of unfeigned admiration at the heavy, iron-serried ranks of the Northmen.

"No one will compel their obedience and no one will rule the descendants of the people who led captive kings and nations chained to their triumphal chariots," replied the Count of Chiaramonte.

"If bombastic speech could have overthrown the hordes who blew out the light of the Western empire,"

Modica, himself of Spanish extraction, replied disdainfully, "you Italians would be lords of the universe to this very hour! The memory of your great deeds is not so extinct as to require reviving for posterity."

A passionate outburst from Chiaramonte was only averted by the timely interposition of Gravina, who, ignoring the slur of the Spaniard, or storing it up for future reckoning, said:

"If we wish to keep these allies, we must tax to their utmost the vineyards of old Trinacria, for every man in this squadron drinks for six."

Loud words, resounding in the direction of the royal dais, caused the group of speakers to divert their attention in that quarter, and their surprise was too manifest for concealment when they beheld the towering form of Landulf of Trent addressing Manfred in tones concise and determined.

"Our duty belongs to Elizabeth, widow of Emperor Conrad. Therefore we depart. The King of Sicily is the friend of the Moslems. They will protect his realms without the aid of his German knights."

The sudden tidings of Conradino's death had almost deprived the king of his self-possession. A solution more favourable of the question of succession not even the most sanguine would have dared to hope for; yet the sorrow for the untimely demise of Emperor Conrad's child mixed a bitter drop in the cup of joy, a bitterness now enhanced by the open defection of the Suabian leader. To retain him and his knights Manfred endeavoured to temporize.

"Can no persuasion of ours retain you in our service, Count Landulf?" he replied, after a brief pause. "We require knights brave and true. Has the future emperor

more to offer than the son of Frederick, the dead emperor whom you loved so well?"

The Teuton wavered. The memory of the man who, though he had adopted Italy as the land of his choice, had never lost the hearts of his German subjects, exercised even now a potent spell over him. Manfred stood before him, the reincarnation of Frederick as Count Landulf had known him when he followed him through Apulia on his way to the Holy Land. The appeal of the emperor's glorious son seemed slowly to find the way to his heart, then he caught a sudden glimpse of the Saracen Emir Sidi Yussuff in the suite of the king.

A dark frown clouded the furrowed brow of the Suabian leader as, inclining his stupendous form toward the Mahometan, his voice rang through the hall with a bluntness he endeavoured not to subdue:

"We like not your infidel hordes as brothers-in-arms, King Manfred! We like not to fight side by side with those against whom your imperial ancestor lost crown and life. Let the king surround himself with Christian knights that offend not Holy Church, and the contingents of Landulf of Trent will remain!"

Ominous silence followed the speech of the Teuton, while the eyes of the whole assembly rested uneasily on the countenance of the king, who stared at the speaker in a manner so bewildered that it seemed as if he refused to accept the testimony of his senses. Then the old spirit of his house came over him, the spirit of Barbarossa when he humbled Pope Alexander I., the spirit of his father Frederick when he hurled defiance into the teeth of Innocent IV. His whole frame seemed to expand; his bosom heaved, and his eyes darted lightning-bolts of wrath on the overbold, who had dared to dictate to the majesty of Hohenstaufen.

"This is too insolent, Count Landulf!" he exclaimed, "and since you but came to mock us with an homage foreign to your heart, begone from our presence for ever! The throne of Sicily totters not without your spears! Begone ere we forget that clemency should mark the hour, and chastise the insolent vassal according to his deserts! We crave your presence in the Capella Palatina, my lords of the kingdom, to invoke the blessing and guidance of the supreme power in the portentous hour that is to cement the union of Italy!"

With these words the king turned his back upon the assembly, and, retreating toward the great marble stairway, was soon lost to sight amid the pompous train of courtiers and attendants who thronged the vast corridors. The gorgeous court dissolved as rapidly as the coloured clouds of sunset after the sun has disappeared.

Landulf of Trent, hardly anticipating such a reception of his speech, had slunk back among the Apulians, shunned by every one and never noting the significant glance and the tart smile at his discomfiture which the Duke of Altamura exchanged with Sidi Yussuff, the emir. With crossed legs and immobile as a pagoda, the Saracen leader was poised on the heavy Persian carpet, showing but by the light of his eyes that he was a thing living.

The High Constable was one of the last to quit the hall of audience, being but shortly preceded by the Count of Trent, whose countenance reflected but too clearly his consternation. At the end of the corridor the duke essayed to overtake the burly Teuton, touching him familiarly on the shoulder.

Landulf turned upon him a visage so fretful and gloomy that the duke laughed despite of himself.

"By St. Andrew! Thou hast the most vinegarlike

aspect that ever captain or courtier wore! Cheer up, man! All is not lost! Thou hast crossed the king in his very pleasaunce, 'tis true, but every vintage hath its sour grapes."

The German scanned the face of the duke, uncertain whether to resent his familiarity or to feel flattered.

"Methinks it had been to my advantage if neither fear nor hope had ever brought me to these volcanic regions," he then replied, with a grunt.

"Our volcanoes have strange humours, choosing the most tranquil night for their manifestations. But how dismally thou starest, as if the fear of intended punishment made thy limbs quake! And yet thou couldst in very truth be a great man in the kingdom and command an army, if thou couldst but swallow some of thy scruples! Must thou foam like an epileptic, when thy chaste glance falls upon a Moslem? Tut, man, Emperor Frederick was a Christian, too, yet he had a seraglio in every hamlet in Apulia."

"I meant the king no offence," Landulf of Trent replied, "though he seems to be one of those pragmatic lords who must have the whole tree, or he will not a cherry of it. I desire nothing now but to leave the island, and will scarcely bide till the day's clamour is over!"

"Festina lente — haste slowly, as the old Romans said! The king is justly provoked; besides, these sudden tidings have spread infinite distrust. Ponder well, count! Thou canst not bring back to life the youth Conradino, and the wild birds starve not more in this country than in thy sombre forests. The king can be reconciled — he is not implacable. Remain thou here! At best thou canst overtake thy lances ere they reach the northern passes!"

And, with a meaning nod, the duke parted from the German, leaving him to ponder over his strange speech.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FERRYMAN

OTTORINO had been a close witness to the scene between Manfred and the Count of Trent, for the king had retained him by his side, engaging him in occasional conversation. But after the masses left the Sala Regia, instead of joining the royal procession on its way to the Capella Palatina, Ottorino hastened out and lost himself in the throngs crowding the piazza. He wandered restlessly about the great city, with no thought but for the impending interview which was to pave the way for future appointments, and revolving in his mind the strange mysteries, at which Helena di Miraval had darkly hinted. In vain he strove to take an interest in what he beheld. He was rather distracted than amused by the babel-like confusion of nations, languages, and costumes which surrounded him on every side.

The sun was sinking into the Tyrrhenian Sea when the Lombard found himself before the convent gates of Santa Lucia. It was the hour of vespers; the chapel was filled with a silent crowd, absorbed in their devotions. The only light came from the evening sun, duskily illuminating the emblazoned windows, or from the faint glimmer of distant shrines. Ottorino took his station in the background of the chapel, thus having opportunity for observing any one entering or leaving the

sanctuary. The chant of "Regina Cœli," rising like angels' voices on clouds of incense, shed its calm for a moment even into Ottorino's perturbed and wildly beating heart. But ever and ever his thoughts reverted to the purpose of his presence, and when, after the last Gloria, the worshippers, one by one, slowly left the chapel, he scrutinized so closely their departing forms, that some devoutly crossed themselves, believing the dark knight bent on purposes little in keeping with the sanctity of the spot. While anxiously awaiting the moment when the deserted chapel would offer to the lady of Miraval the opportunity to approach him, the gates of the confessional suddenly swung open, and a woman glided out. She was closely veiled, and in his absorption of mind Ottorino might have scarcely noticed her had not the lady paused with a gesture of surprise when she beheld the Lombard's dark, towering form. Then she quickened her steps and hastened out.

Ottorino stared after her departing form, as one turned to stone.

It seemed to him as if the cold chill of death had touched his limbs, and his face, in its livid pallor and its stony gaze, resembled rather that of a spectre than a creature in the flesh. Even his heart-beats seemed to stop as he gazed at the vanishing apparition, — the form of Helena di Miraval, which he would have recognized among thousands. How long he stood so he knew not, nor did he heed the curious gaze of a few belated worshippers, who had been lingering in the chapel. At last, however, shaking with an almost supernatural effort the stupor from his benumbed limbs, the Lombard flew after the vanishing apparition. He went with such a speed as to almost knock down those who encountered him in his headlong pursuit of the fair confessionalist in her precipi-

tate exit. It was now a matter of life and death with him, to satisfy the dreadful doubts which had suddenly arisen within him. But having attracted to himself much unwelcome attention by his rash and unpremeditated act, Ottorino fell into a slower pace. Suddenly the retreating form vanished as if the earth had swallowed her, and the Lombard found himself alone in the vaulted archways of the cloisters.

He paused, stroking his clammy forehead as if to convince himself that he was not dreaming. Why had she shrunk from his approach? Why this precipitate flight — this startled look? Was it true, despite her disavowal, despite the protestations of her innocence, what people did not even trouble themselves to whisper? Were they true, those strange, monstrous tales? A groan, as from an animal wounded to death, broke from his lips, while he pressed his ice-cold hands to his burning temples. All the riches of Lombardy, his station and wealth, Ottorino would at this moment have gladly sacrificed for the certainty that it was not Helena di Miraval whom he had beheld. In a mood so abstracted, with pale face and lips tightly set, with the anguish of his soul reflected in his eyes, he approached the gates of the cloisters. So wild was his appearance that those who passed him whispered to each other, with a shy glance at his tall and gloomy form, that his sins must indeed weigh heavily upon him.

For a moment the Lombard stood irresolute. Then, having accosted some wandering friar and ascertained from him the direction of the Dominican's habitation, Ottorino reverted to his former intent of obtaining light and truth at any cost. The frate indicated a narrow lane, which descended to the Oreto in a precipitous slope.

Ottorino followed this, and soon arrived at the landing-place, where he gave the usual whistle.

After waiting for considerable time, only one little boat appeared. The owner seemed to be asleep in despair of custom, for it was not until Ottorino had repeated the whistle more shrilly that the boatman set his oars in motion and came slowly over the water.

It was a barge of the model that might have been in vogue when the first Greek settlers came from the Peloponnesus. A spar of some supple wood, nearly double the length of the boat, lay across a little mast, with its canvas ready to be spread for shelter, or to catch any favouring breeze. The prow was high and curved, and ornamented with rude carvings; the rudder broad, the oars of classical squatness. The old man himself who rowed it seemed dried and hardened by exposure and toil into some kind of wood, though the expression of gloom and discontent on his visage belonged too much to the flesh.

Ottorino stepped into the barge without exchanging as much as a word with his equally laconic Charon, until, having taken his place at the rudder, he designated the point where he wanted the boatman to land him. The latter immediately splashed in his oars, and they were fairly out on the bay ere the Lombard observed that there was a third person in the boat, garbed in the costume of a peasant of the marshes.

"What doest thou here, fellow? This boat is mine for this trip," said Ottorino, not without a start of unpleasant surprise.

The peasant replied in a rude and broken dialect that he craved his Lordship's pardon, but that his own errand brooked no delay, and implored to be allowed to accompany him.

Ottorino hesitated for an instant, but, considering the determined manner of the ruffian, which gave the humility in his phrase a tinge of mockery, the doubtful nature of his own suspicions, and the boatman's appearance, he refrained from his first intention, which was to throw the third incumbent overboard.

"If thou art indeed in such marvellous haste that thou forgettest even to pay for thy passage," he said, at last, hitting upon an ingenious plan to obviate any sudden danger from the lurking right hand of the peasant, "take a pair of oars and help the old man on, or I tell thee plainly one of us two must leave the wood for the water."

A slight shuffling of the hand in the cloak seemed to indicate that the Lombard's suspicions were not entirely unfounded. At any rate, the sheathing of a weapon would have produced a similar sound. But the man obeyed without seeming hesitation, and thus reinforced the boat shot rapidly down the stream.

The Visconti's observation never in reality wandered from the persons of his rowers, but he affected to survey the shores on both sides with the natural curiosity of a stranger.

On one side reposed the ancient city said to have been founded by the Phœnicians, on the other extended fragrant and exotic Moorish gardens, with their solitary, dreaming palaces. The moon, shining in a sky of silvery blue, revealed the distant magnificence of La Zisa, and gleamed brightly on the gilded cupolas of La Cufa. Through the mellow, starlit air came the melodious chords of the evening chimes from the belfry of San Giovanni degli Eremiti.

From the near-by convent of Santa Onofria rose the chant of the nuns, "Ave Maria Stella." It seemed to

be borne aloft on the wings of the balmy night-wind to the spheres, where all the stormy longings of this earth have been stilled.

By degrees the shores widened into the elbow-like bend of the Oreto below the slopes of Monte Pellegrino, and the ancient monastery of the Dominicans came into sight. Beyond it the river took another deep curve, bathing the base of the mountain. Even from this point of observation colossal relics of ancient grandeur, shattered walls, naked porticoes, wildernesses of broken arches and solitary columns, could be discerned amid woods and wild vegetation.

The peasant, busy at the oars, did little to excite further suspicion, and both he and the old boatman plied their task manfully, until suddenly, opposite the mouth of the Oreto, they dropped their oars as by a preconcerted signal, and began to mutter a *Pater Noster*.

In spite of this pious exordium, the knight's suspicions would have vented themselves in some positive form but for his observation that the boatman and the seeming peasant both stopped short and looked at each other with surprise.

"Hast thou a vow to Santa Lucia too, brother?" said the old boatman, speaking almost for the first time since he had taken his passengers on board.

"Nay, friend, but about here, they say, is the great mouth of the city's sinks, down which so many dead Christians hourly float, and it might be well to pray for the souls of any that might now be coming," replied the disguised bravo.

"And here began my ill luck, for ever since that night, when I saw the body of a young cavalier thrown into the river yonder, I have been shunned like the very pestilence by all but strangers whom Santa Lucia occasionally

sends to keep me from dying of starvation," said the old boatman, dismally.

"Art thou quite sure thou sawest that, old man? I know some one who would repay such intelligence as might guide his vengeance with gold untold," returned the peasant, while he drew himself with a sudden slide toward the old man, gazing at him fixedly and putting his hand under his cloak. But ere the deed could follow the gesture, Ottorino sprang forward, and with a sudden exertion of his great strength hurled the bravo overboard.

"Signor, would you murder the man?" exclaimed the boatman, staring aghast.

"If he be what he pretends, he will keep himself above water — if not, there are better than he below. But is this stiletto thine, old man?"

The boatman crossed himself, moving away from the object in question as if it had been a serpent.

"Oh, Santa Lucia, no," he exclaimed, "but I think I have seen just such a one dangling from the belt of one Passerino, who is a follower of great Ghino di Tacco across the sea."

"Would, then, I had a bow, for yonder his head is emerging from the water. He is making for the reeds in the island. But thou art feeble. I will myself tug at the oar."

The old ferryman shook his head.

"Everything has gone wrong with me since that night. I was not always so gloomy and wretched."

"But tell me thy story. How chanced it?"

"Ah! It was some such night as this, but it was on a Friday and near midnight. I had unloaded some fruits on the shore yonder, near the Moorish quarters, and was resting in my boat, when I saw coming out of

that lane to the left of the convent two masked men, who by their skulking, uncertain manner of going forward and backward showed that they were only there to ascertain if there was anybody else about."

"Hast thou no recollection of their appearance?" interrupted the knight, eagerly.

"By our Lady, one was very much like yonder rogue whom I hope your Lordship has sunk; the other, by his stiff gait, might have been a Spaniard."

"A Spaniard!" Ottorino repeated, almost involuntarily, but the boatman continued:

"Having explored in every direction and seeing not a living soul, for I lay motionless and invisible beneath the sail, not daring to move, — and would to all the saints I had been asleep! — they returned up the same lane. Shortly after two others came out, repeated the same manoeuvre, and then — out of the lane came a masked cavalier on a coal-black charger, dressed in black, to the black feather drooping from his Spanish hat, and he carried — our Lady have mercy upon us — across his saddle, head and arms on one side, feet on the other, the body of a dead man. These three slowly approached the water's edge, the two companions of the horseman seized the dead carcass, one by the arms, the other by the legs, and, after swinging it to and fro, they tossed it headlong into the water. The dark horseman turned his head away during this act, as if shunning the horror of the sight, but after he heard the splash in the water he whirled his horse around and turned his face to the river."

"And his face — dost thou remember it?"

"I have already told your Lordship he wore a mask, besides, I dared not look on him, for fear his eyes, that gleamed like coals, should meet mine. There is some-

thing strange about eyes. Men always feel when they are looked at. But the corpse floated on the water and would not sink. Then the two on foot threw heavy stones upon it, and one striking it made it go to the bottom. And barely had the last bubble disappeared when a girl came shrieking down the narrow lane, and two old women with dishevelled hair after her. But what they had to do with the matter I know not, only this, that the masked rider galloped up to her and seized her by her long black hair. She swooned, and the women carried her off, while the men turned up another lane and disappeared. But why I should be shunned like the plague for that, our Lady alone may know."

"But the girl — what was she like?" exclaimed Ottorino, with such sudden anxiety that the boatman eyed him suspiciously.

"How do I know?" the old man replied, gruffly. "I suppose she was a girl like any other girl."

"Didst thou not even see the colour of her hair?" said the Lombard, with forced calmness. "I am not asking this question to amuse myself, but there is a deep reason for it."

"Her hair was black, I thought I told you so, — black as night, and on it I noticed a string of coins, such as the Moorish women wear for adornment — they glittered in the moonlight," the boatman replied, wearily.

"But why didst thou not impart thy knowledge to the governor of the city, to gain some clue to the assassins?"

"The saints reward your Lordship," returned the boatman, with a grim smile. "Since I have earned my living on the Oretto I have seen dead bodies pass into the water in like manner at least a hundred times, and no one asked any questions, either. So, thinking this would pass like the rest, I minded my own business until I heard that

he who was lost in that night was Enrico, the younger brother of the king. And a high-born lady's name was darkly connected with the deed. So I thought I should make a good day's work by carrying the news to the king."

The boatman paused and sighed.

"And for five apostonari I ruined myself, for that was what the duke gave me, adding it was too much for a drunkard's dream."

"The duke?" reëchoed Ottorino. "Didst thou not say that thou tookest thine information to the king?"

"Ay; but I advanced no further than the duke's chamber, he who is now high constable. Could I have given him a clue to the assassin, I might indeed have made my fortune, for the lady Helena, his kinswoman, was almost mad with grief, and he, too, seemed much affected. 'Tis hard, indeed, that one's conscience should cheat one out of the daily bread. And yet perhaps it was best it chanced thus. For if the real assassins, whoever they were, would have thought that I could betray them, they would have cut my throat ere I could get the words well out of it, and who knows who was in the secret? But yonder are the wilds of the Pellegrino, and I trust your Lordship will remember I have but so many passengers as the blessed saints send me in defiance of my evil fortune."

"And in addition to good pay, old father, I will give thee a good counsel," said the Lombard, with a heavy sigh. "Do not tell thy tale to too many passengers, even strangers like myself, for thou mayest not always find such honest listeners. Nay, perchance thou mayest meet with some one who, like yon honest peasant whom we left in the water, may have reasons of their own to stop thy tongue close to thy throat!"

After having remunerated the boatman much beyond the latter's expectation, Ottorino left the barge, pondering over the strange tale which his mysterious Charon had poured into his ear.

Then, with a fierce determination to learn the truth at all hazards, he began the rather steep ascent on the opposite side.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RECLUSE OF MONTE PELLEGRINO

TAKING the road indicated by the friar, Ottorino pursued his solitary path. What his own purpose was he could at this stage scarcely have said. His feelings and motives were by this time so hopelessly perplexed that he could not determine which prompting to follow, and so lost was he in thought that without even noticing the ruined arches scattered along his way, and pervaded by a silence, a desolation so deep and complete, that the hush was intensified rather than broken by the distant hum of the city, he lost himself in the wilds which stretched along the base of Monte Pellegrino. Once these wilds had been covered with gorgeous and majestic palaces, now there were only a few shepherds' huts and the ruins of the Carthaginian period.

Gradually all traces of a road vanished, and on both sides rose woody acclivities, covered with ruins and melancholy cypresses. The only guide whom Ottorino could now follow was the Oreto, whose waters, as the friar had informed him, flowed very near the ruins of which he was in search.

And this guide indeed proved more faithful than the majority of that gentry in the Lombard's days, for, after murmuring through a deep wood, the underbrush of which consisted chiefly of wild roses in full bloom, it

conducted him into a verdant desert, over the midst of which the baths of Roger the Second were scattered. For a few moments the Visconti stood gazing at the immense desolation, the wilderness of shattered arches, lonely columns, ivy-covered porticoes, fallen walls, and jagged round towers. The hopelessness of finding among these unknown masses the Dominican's hermitage impressed itself upon him. Pausing irresolutely, he would probably have returned but that he chanced to perceive a figure advancing out of the ruins, apparently bound for the city. Hoping that it might either prove some follower of the monk, or some peasant acquainted with the locality, he hastily advanced toward the unknown, who came on muttering and crossing himself, as if pronouncing a spell against evil spirits. So absorbed was he in his occupation that he perceived not the knight until the latter stood directly in front of him.

This sudden apparition excited such a terror in the beholder that the monk, for such he was, uttered a terrific yell, and would have fled had not Ottorino, anticipating his intention, held him fast by his cassock.

"In the name of the five wounds — who art thou?" gasped the friar, after staring stonily at the knight for a moment or two.

"It matters little to thy purpose or mine either, father," replied the Lombard. "Lead me to the presence of Fra Domenico — my business is with him."

The friar stood quaking and gazing at the stranger with undiminished awe and suspicion, not daring either to take flight or to remain, and it was some moments before he could be induced by the protestations, mingled with threats, of Ottorino to guide him to the Dominican's cell.

"Santa Maria, *Ora pro nobis!*" muttered the friar,

while he led the way with many a shuddering side glance, being in great doubt as to whether or not his nocturnal companion did not intend to stab him from behind. The way led through the central masses of the ruins, and beneath innumerable shattered arches. Viewing the interminable alleys of pillars and colonnades and dark chambers extending on either side, it seemed to the Lombard as if time alone could not have wrought that prodigious destruction, but that an earthquake or some other elementary power must have assisted.

Once or twice they startled a sleeping goat in the aisles of the ruins, and at the sight of its horns the friar muttered unnumbered Aves, as if he momentarily expected to behold the evil one rise from the underbrush. At times an owl shot with a wild hoot over the monk's torch; with these exceptions they encountered no living object to break the hush of the sepulchral desolation.

At length the frate turned to the right beneath the remains of a triumphal portico, on each side of which stood the headless marble trunks of Demeter and Proserpina. Thence he entered into a wilderness of grottoes, the broad corridors of which were at times almost choked with odoriferous shrubs and wild flowers, pouring out their sweetness on the desert air without stint or measure. At last he paused before what might have been at one time an entrance to the Moorish baths, judging from the remains of the magnificent columns bearing Kufic inscriptions; then he ascended a flight of grass-grown steps and entered a series of desolate chambers, which, although roofless and choked with rank vegetation, still bore traces of their ancient splendour. These chambers led to a clumsy door, which, being hastily pushed open by the friar, admitted his companion to this most singular hermitage for philosopher or monk.

High, oval-shaped apertures admitted light and air together, and with the aid of the friar's torch and the glowing embers of a dying fire revealed a large chamber strewn with curious and cabalistical instruments. Pausing almost breathless at the entrance of the cell, the Lombard noted not the sudden disappearance of Fra Cyrillo. His gaze was riveted upon the Dominican, who, evidently anticipating no visitors, was seated at a massive stone table, which was covered with open volumes of ponderous manuscript, nearly all written in the languages of the East. In addition thereto he was perusing a huge parchment, which was quaintly illuminated and headed in large characters, "De Prædestinatione."

For some moments the monk, as if overcome by exhaustion, reclined in his chair wrapped in deep meditation.

"This, then, was the thesis," he mused, half-aloud, after the manner of solitary thinkers. "*Prædestinatio est necessitas*. Fate is inevitable, and yet—God is just. These are the terms: St. Augustine hath said it, and is it a demon or angel in thy soul that would have thee believe it? And do they hang on my lips for the echoes of heavenly oracles—echoes only of the dreams of men, when in every human heart that beats—no, no! Let us not look into the heart! It is not there—but where is it? In these musty parchments? In the sweet, silent air of night,—up there, whence the cold stars sparkle down upon us, cold to our sufferings—our misery? 'Apage Satanas! What have I to do with love—with bliss—with beauty? Satan, I spit at thee! But if it was eternally thus, if we are eternally damned, or eternally saved, why make this short pause of existence a part of that hell which is to come, while it might at least have been one short glimpse of paradise, of heaven? Is then

love a crime? Wert thou not first a man ere thou becamest a monk? And must thou sit on a frozen eminence and behold mankind rejoicing in the warm valleys beneath? Must thou see the portals of paradise open to countless myriads, but to read, glaring from the tablets of judgment, the decree of fate: 'Not for thee — not for thee!' Thou alone shalt hunger for a word of love — thou alone shalt starve for a caress — thou alone shalt despair of happiness! Could I but once, once call it mine, but for one single moment, swift as thought, could I but once drain the glittering, deceptive goblet to its very dregs — wretch! What is the fiend whispering to thee? And yet, what is man — mere man?"

He paused, and the perfect stillness of the wastes of the Pellegrino permitted some breathing of remote music to reach the Dominican's ear. After listening for a moment he arose and traversed his cell at a rapid pace.

"They are around her now — they gaze upon her with their gloating eyes — what is it to thee, Fra Domenico? What is it to thee? Who knows the pangs of misery that clutch thy heart under the cowl? Who knows the anguish of thy soul under the mask of thy livid face? When the gaze seems stony and passionless, who knows of the snow-capped volcano with a burning hell within? Measureless sacrifice, imposed by Heaven itself! Ah, let us not think! Immortality were not too great a prize if — ha! Thou lean, emaciated friar, what is it thou ravest? Even the conclusion of the thesis: *Non perseverantes usque ad finem non sunt prædestinati* — that is all, and the end of the world's wisdom is — Death!"

Without understanding the drift of the Dominican's soliloquy, and without further preliminaries, Ottorino entered the cell and, stepping up to the friar, who had

re-seated himself, he addressed him with a low bend of the head.

"Your pardon and blessing, holy father, for one whose weighty business alone emboldens this intrusion."

The Dominican started at the suddenness of the Lombard's appearance; his livid cheeks grew paler still, and his right hand convulsively grasped the rope of his girdle, as if he expected to find some weapon there.

"Art thou sent by heaven or by hell?" he then said, darting a wild, unsteady glance at his late visitor.

"Doubtlessly by heaven, since I stand in the presence of so renowned a light of the Church," returned Ottorino.

"Speak thy purpose, then!" replied the monk, while he drew the cowl deeper over his forehead.

"I came hither on a singular purpose, father, and yet I hardly know how to shape my question, so strange it is, — but at least I may confide in thy secrecy?" Ottorino replied, while, racked with doubts, he was at a loss how to commence.

The Dominican pointed to the crucifix above the altar, while he said:

"Speak on; I listen, and no one else on earth!"

"Men say thou art profoundly skilled and learned in all manner of doctrine, so that thy words can set the soul at rest on every point," Ottorino began, hesitatingly, almost wishing he had not come.

The monk appeared but little flattered by this courtesy.

"Men say many things — but to thy purpose, for only time stands between us and eternity!"

The Lombard glanced swiftly around the chamber, as if to convince himself that there was no listener besides the friar.

Could he have withdrawn even now, he would have retraced his steps to the city, for his former feelings of

doubt and anguish had melted into softer emotions, and once again faith in the woman of his love reigned supreme as he conjured up before his inner gaze the face, the eyes, so dearly beloved.

He felt the Dominican's gaze burn into his very soul, and, after vainly struggling for a milder form in which to clothe his question, he faltered:

"I love a lady beautiful and pure as the angels of light, but of whom strange, monstrous rumours are afloat. My heart is torn and racked, and my soul is stifling in its anguish. To seek the truth, father, I came hither to thee. Thou wilt not refuse the fount to him who thirsteth?"

The Dominican listened with profound attention, then he glanced with astonishment at his visitor.

"Thou comest to me? Why dost thou come to me? Who am I, that I could set thy doubting heart at rest? Faith is the rock on which true love is founded. Thou seekest truth — but what is this truth?"

The Dominican paused for a moment.

"Thou sayest thou lovest her," he then continued, while his eyes flashed fire and the pallor of his face seemed enhanced by the glow of his fixed orbs. "Thou sayest thou lovest her, and thou comest to me on this black errand? Begone — thy love is a deception and a snare!"

"Not so, father, not so! Thou misjudgest me, by the crucified One up there, thou dost! I love her, love her so madly that I would forego all the world has in store for me for her! But if doubts, strange, maddening doubts, have arisen in my soul, it was because circumstances even stranger warranted this quaking fear. I love her, love her — with a love one so calm and passionless as thyself cannot understand."

"Thou deemest, then, that there are no passions save those which take the outward form of speech? None that, like the Spartan's fox, gnaw the silent heart to shreds beneath the mantle?" replied the Dominican, gloomily. "But she who has enwrapped thy heart in flame, is she so beautiful and does she love thee in return?"

"Oh, she is fairer than a vision from paradise, and she has confessed her love to me."

"Indeed — indeed!" the Dominican muttered, while he glanced at Ottorino as if wondering what sort of assistance he could give. "But, my son, how is it in my power to allay those fears, whose hidden cause I know not?"

Ottorino started.

"Thou, father, art the confessor of an illustrious lady, — give me but the certainty, and I will repay thee as thou never hast been paid."

It was the Dominican's turn to evince surprise, and with such blank dismay did he stare at the Visconti that the latter believed his very worst fears realized. A strange gleam lightened the face of the monk, as with forced composure he replied:

"Strange indeed — strange indeed! Yet thou knowest but too well the obligations of the confessional to which thou appealest. Canst thou hope that less than a mandate from heaven would cause me to betray its secrets?"

"Give me but the truth, father — give me but the truth!"

The Dominican remained silent, and avoided the Visconti's eager gaze.

"I am answered sufficiently in that refusal — yet to admit a negative were to transgress none of heaven's

mandates," the Lombard said, despairingly, while he covered his face with his hands.

"A negative may affirm,—I have said nothing," said the Dominican, much agitated. "What are the accusations thou preferrest against this very beautiful lady whom thou lovest so ardently?"

The tinge of bitter irony in the monk's speech was not lost upon the Lombard, although he ignored it.

"They are not mine, father, they are not mine," he replied, raising both hands as if deprecating the insinuation. "They are the whisperings of —"

"The whisperings — yea, the whisperings," the Dominican interposed. "Yet thou lovest her! Proceed with the impeachment!"

"They say — they say," Ottorino replied, vacantly, "that she changes her lovers like her gowns."

He paused, breathless, confused, almost regretting his speech.

The Dominican had well-nigh overturned his stool, so quickly had he arisen.

"What? What?" he exclaimed. "Repeat thy speech! Let Satan tickle our ears with music for the damned. Change her lovers — like her gowns?"

To Ottorino's utter amazement the friar paused again; then he broke into such a shrill, discordant laugh, that but for his monkish gown the Visconti would have been tempted to regard him a demon from the nether spheres.

"She loves not — she never has loved!" the Dominican suddenly broke out with vehemence. "And as for her professed love,—it is false! This at least I can tell thee!"

"Thou speakest of what thou knowest, father?" Ottorino gasped, despairingly.

"I speak of what I know, for the dark heavings of a troubled conscience often cast its secrets up to my ken."

"Ah! Thou dost not, thou wilt not understand me, father," exclaimed the Lombard. "And why should thou — how should thou? Thou refuseth the very essence of that which I ask, telling me just enough to make my soul thirst for more."

"Why should I? How should I?" the Dominican repeated, like one in a trance. "What if my calumniator spoke the truth, not of me, but of one in my place? Dost thou know what hell there might be even in the confession and trust which the object of some unhallowed passion reposed, — demonstrations of a hopelessness more certain than any language could bestow? Is it nothing, deemest thou, to make the lips ice-cold in a kiss of tranquil benediction when the heart is on fire? To see a woman kneel at one's feet, whose maddening, intoxicating beauty — but men rave for the most part, and by thine eyes I see that thou dost. What more can I impart to thee, without committing the dreadful sin, and calling down upon my head the vengeance from above?"

"Fear not, father! If the heavens above us should fall, they would cover many an iniquity. Thou hast hinted at some dark, baleful influence," the Lombard continued, misinterpreting the friar's soliloquy. "Can aught breathe the stench of the marshes and live?"

"And what if I admit so much?" said the monk, suddenly.

"Then there are two suppositions —"

"Speak!"

"Either the duke seeks an alliance for his kinswoman more exalted than offers the nobility of the land —"

He paused; then, urged by the Dominican's silent nod, he continued:

"Or the high-born lady tiring, after womankind, to-day, of her lover of yesterday —"

"Stop!" thundered the monk, raising his hands as if conjuring an apparition. "Stop! Verily, thy master the devil has chosen his envoy well! I cannot answer thee on these points; men are to judge men's actions; God alone sees into the heart. Tempt me no more. I had prepared my soul to endure whatever may be, rather than again — Leave me! Tempt me no more!" concluded the monk, with sudden wildness.

"I tempt thee to no sin, father, but rather to a deed pleasing to Him who is the fountainhead of truth, redeeming, perhaps, a fated soul from the snares of Satan," pleaded the knight.

"Nay, then — if the devil comes to us in angelic form, who can resist him?" said the Dominican, with a voice resonant of the echoes of despair. "But thou, who hast approached my hermitage in the hope of enlightenment, thou who deemest my words like the speech of an oracle, how dost thou know that thou art not sorely misguided? How knowest thou that I, instead of spreading the tidings of salvation, am not scattering to the winds the seeds of everlasting damnation? How knowest thou whether I am a reformer or a destroyer, — whether my wages will be glory and life, or death and despair, — whether the deeds now slumbering toward their awaking are prompted by heaven or by hell?"

Involuntarily the Lombard shrank back, while the Dominican continued to speak in rapt tones:

"But who says that I lack signs to support my task? What if revenge was the first prompter? Did not the dream visit me in my youth, when my soul was pure? Ah, for those days, for those days, when the flowers and the earth and the skies were my love, my delight, —

when I longed alone for the infinite,—those days of peace and rapture — gone — gone — gone ! ”

He broke off with a heartrending sigh, as if awaking from a dream, and stared at the knight, who had no more comprehended his meaning than if he had lectured in Hebrew.

“ Then, father confessor, thou avowest that thou canst give me no assistance, that thou canst not set my soul at rest by brightening the reputation of that very beautiful lady ? ” said Ottorino, with ill-suppressed anguish.

“ Again — of what dost thou accuse her — thou, and not that vile serpent-tongued monster, rumour ? ” thundered the Dominican. “ Is it that thou expectest me to assert that in an age so depraved, at a court so frivolous, beneath skies like those of Italy, a woman more beautiful than all her sex is also more honest ? ”

“ Nay — it might even content me couldst thou but say that she is not more vile,” Ottorino returned, with a sigh.

“ I am but little versed in the sex, and know not how to reply. A bookworm of a monk, what counsel can he give in such matters ? ” replied the Dominican, with a sardonic smile. “ When thou canst describe to me the limits of female wickedness, then I will tell thee if she whom thou lovest has passed them. But thou — thou who hast gazed into the heaven of her eyes, thou who hast listened to the sweet music of her voice, — canst thou believe the vile and unblushing calumnies of debauched varlets ? ” concluded the monk, gazing at his visitor with strange incredulity.

“ I have endeavoured to believe, and tried to stifle those fears, father, but they return ever and ever,” replied Ottorino, while his burning orbs were riveted upon the monk, mutely pleading for one ray of light.

The Dominican rose.

"Why, then," he said, slowly, pausing during one long moment, in which the struggle of powerful passions rendered his usually calm face almost terrible, "fear still and be content."

After having pronounced these words, the shock of which vibrated through every nerve of his interrogator's body, the Dominican turned away, as if to say: "I have now satisfied thy desire, thy folly be on thine own head."

Ottorino endeavoured to summon sufficient energy to utter his thanks to the friar with some degree of composure, when the Dominican, facing him, asked if he would not accept of such poor accommodations for the night as his hermitage afforded.

"It were perilous even for one acquainted with the locality to pass through the wastes of Monte Pellegrino in the dark, for there are more rogues than you wot of, signor," the monk said, with a melancholy smile. "But I remember thou art a soldier and must not know fear, therefore I ask thee to stay with me as my guard, if thou wilt not otherwise; the obligation will then be mine. I cannot, indeed, play the host, for I must to my interrupted toil, but Brother Cyrillo is a better and more cheerful companion than he who stands before thee. Ho, Fra Cyrillo!"

The attendant of the monk appeared, crawling in at the doorway on his hands and feet, having been occupied in an investigation of a more jocund nature than his superior. At the Dominican's request he anxiously bestirred himself to promote the comfort of his guest, who availed himself of the invitation to remain, principally for the reason that he cared not to meet any one in his present state of mind. But though he was far from the mood of

enjoying it, he was not to escape so readily Fra Cyrillo's loquacious exuberance.

Never was there a greater contrast than between the stern Dominican and this fat, bubbling, and jolly friar. He talked incessantly, even while blowing the coals into a blaze, and expanded most prolifically on the excellence of the viands he spread before the knight. He also regarded with woful glances Ottorino's brimming tankard of wine, which the latter had not even set to his lips.

"Drink while you may, drink while you may," he at last broke out, with a rueful glance at his own goblet, "no man drinks for ever! This is a vigil of the Church, and it behoves us brethren to set the laity an example. It is wine from Chios, fit for the saints."

And the round-bellied frate smacked his lips, while he caused the contents of one tankard after another to disappear.

For some time Ottorino, instead of listening to Cyrillo's discourse, was lost in deep, abstracted reverie. The amazing contradiction in the Dominican's words had so utterly staggered him that his thoughts were in a hopeless whirl. For a moment the hope gleamed flashlike in his heart that the friar's revelations might have been prompted by motives of jealousy, but, small as this last straw was, he let it go; it was a surmise too wild, too improbable.

All the while Fra Cyrillo spoke on, nothing daunted by the sullenness of his companion, who never heard one word of his long discourse. It was with a start that he heard the remote bells of cloisters and convents toll the midnight hour. The fat friar then apologized to Ottorino for keeping him awake so long, and, laughing jollily at his own remarks, busied himself with preparing and arranging the rushes which were to constitute the Lom-

bard's impromptu resting-place. After having performed this task to his satisfaction, the friar was about to betake himself to his own heap, when his superior, in the adjoining chamber, desired him to bring him another lamp ere he retired to rest. The jolly friar immediately rinsed his mouth of the fumes of the wine, took a jar of oil, and disappeared with a somewhat wavering step. Then the Lombard stretched himself on his rough bed, but it was long before sleep closed his lids. The reaction, when he recalled the strange incident at the convent, coupled with the dark insinuations of the ferryman, was so great that he fell from one uneasy slumber into another, broken by fitful visions of the face which with so mad a love he had dreamed into his heart.

CHAPTER X.

LA ZISA

THE Moorish palace of La Zisa lay bathed in the splendour of the full moon. A soft breeze dreamily stirred the leaves of the majestic palm-trees which gave to the Oriental structure a weird and dreamlike appearance. Built and inhabited by the Norman, William the First, the palace had been deserted ever since Henry the Sixth had entered Palermo on his tour of conquest. Perhaps its walls reëchoed the dying wails of the last of the Norman kings. The surroundings of La Zisa were deserted, as if the palace had changed to an habitation of evil spirits, and not one belated nightly wanderer approached the confines of the Moorish gardens.

The slanting rays of the moonlight, which fell upon the grilled windows on the western side of the inner court, — for the palace possessed no windows on the outside, — showed two personages engaged in lively conversation. One was the disguised peasant who had so recently come into contact with the watery elements, and who looked ghastly enough in his dripping garments. The other was Crivello the Catalan, whose usually gloomy features were now lit up with a vexation that gave him a most demoniacal aspect.

“Yea — we almost missed our cue, but this cursed Lombard shall have a handful of our bad luck, let but

his Highness hear your story," said Crivello, who had been listening to the bravo's long detail. "And hark! I hear him, for I would know his gait came he on wolf's paws."

Almost as these words were uttered, two dark figures in long Spanish cloaks, both wearing slouched hats drawn deeply over their faces, entered the inner court. Neither spoke, and so rapt was the Duke of Altamura in profound rumination that he heeded not Caserta's outcry when his gaze first lighted on the sinister form of the bravo. But when the duke's eye did suddenly encounter the scowling visage of that worthy, he gave a start backward and drew a stiletto from his breast.

"My lord, it is a messenger from Ghino," exclaimed Crivello, remarking the gesture of the duke.

The bravo bent almost to his boots, or, rather, sandals, for they closely resembled the old Italian greaves.

"I beg your mercy, honest signor," said the duke, returning the bow with mock solemnity. "Who could have expected to meet with anything but honest folk at this place—and in such company? But you spoke in good time, Crivello," the duke added, with a meaning glance at his drawn weapon; then addressing in turn the bandit, he continued in the same tone of veiled sarcasm:

"As for you, honest signor, whatever illustrious name you may bear, you look for all the world as if you had walked the waves of the sea as did the Saviour of old, only with less flattering results. Tell us how it befell, and give me the message you are bearer of."

The tone of the duke had assumed a threatening shade, but the bravo needed no impelling force to detail his wrongs, of which he evidently cherished the most bitter recollection.

"Well, you came well-nigh failing; the best of us may

fail, even with the devil's own hand in it, though he has helped the cause greatly," said the duke, thoughtfully, and not at all so incensed against the rash Lombard as the two worthies had anticipated.

"And now, honest signor, are you not very anxious and resolved to be avenged on him for this long deferred baptismal of yours?"

"I will pay him, capital and interest, ere many suns go down in Palermo," said the bravo, with a vicious glare.

"Then hearken to me, my honest friend," said the duke, in a tone most affable, as if he offered the bandit preferment and recompense for his services. "If you but pluck one hair of him who recognized you for what you are, I will have you torn to pieces by the most exquisite and marrow-piercing torture you have ever heard of. Remember what I have said; keep your tongue behind your teeth and return to the mainland, for if to-morrow at sundown the faintest shadow of your presence darken the walks of this city, I will have you hanged so high that you shall be the highest in the whole kingdom, and thus fitly rewarded for your valour. Take him away, Crivello! Pay him double what I have promised him, then let him go."

After staring at each other in vacant bewilderment, the two worthies left the court of La Zisa, the bandit bowing profusely in anticipation of his reward. Their steps died away in the stillness of the Southern night, a stillness which was only broken by the fitful tune of a barcarole floating softly on perfumed breezes from across the bay, or by the uneasy fluttering of a bat seeking the dusk. The duke hastily broke the seal of the parchment which the bandit had delivered to him, and which,

while outwardly showing signs of ill usage, had retained its contents well preserved.

The Count of Caserta's gaze was riveted upon the duke's countenance as the latter perused the message from Ghino di Tacco, Calabria's celebrated bandit chief.

"Has the Conclave spoken?" he at last broke out, with ill-concealed impatience.

"Whether the present Conclave will make a Pope or not — it will surely cause diverse halos to encircle heads now deep in sin!"

"In that event I deem, if all the saints in heaven were as contentious after an errand as the porters at the gates of St. John Lateran, there is neither a prince nor lord in Italy at this present naming who is not too affectionately and zealously served by the devil to need their aid!"

"Then perchance my lord Andrea Colonna's good devil hath stood his friend on this occasion," replied the duke, gravely. "Maybe he prayed so earnestly in his tribulation that it was thought expedient to leave him to be plucked at a time of less grace than the present, when heaven showers indulgences as liberally as girls throw the yellow asphodels at one another in the Campagna in April."

"Your Lordship is pleased to jest. A Colonna in the chair of St. Peter?"

"The sidewalks in Rome are slippery and the melons are ripening," returned the duke, with a meaning glance. "Then let the saints come to the rescue! Have we not most generously swelled their number? Have we not increased the efficacy of their intercession? I would be Gonfalonier of Rome and shoe my horse with silver, — but not by the grace of the Church or the charity of the Roman mob! Yet there is one who thwarts and destroys

all my plans!" the duke concluded, with a passionate outburst.

"Do I live to hear the Duke of Altamura say this of a man above ground?" Caserta replied, with a sneer.

"Nay, Reinald Aquino, you do not, by San Gennaro, you do not!" returned the duke, hurriedly, and his companion remarked that he turned suddenly pale.

"The last incumbent of the office died rather suddenly."

"I remember, when I rode behind him on my silly mule, perched in my violet cardinal robes, his horse bespattered me with mud as he reined up suddenly to salute a certain high-born lady. I was in such a passion that I almost choked. You should have heard how the rabble laughed!"

"Ay—they laughed so loud that we heard it at Naples! But what matters it? Your Lordship is the man for the place—and twenty-five thousand florins—a beggar's dream!"

"And Christ was sold for thirty silver pieces! Though, as for our fitness,—we have been lawyer, soldier, priest, Is that not a receipt to make the devil? For he hath been all three by turns!"

"And was adjudged great in all. But your Lordship's acceptance must head off the choice of the Conclave!"

"Ha! Is then the hour so nigh? Am I indeed to rise a second Crescentius to plant the banners of a new Roman world over the Capitol? And who would not obey him, an Italian, uniting in his person worldly power with papal sanction! Rise, then, my star! Thy vision approaches its fulfilment, Dom Alamo!"

After this eloquent outburst of enthusiasm the duke turned suddenly to Caserta.

"But for you, Reinald Aquino — where sets the sun of your dream?"

There was something in Altamura's demeanour which caused Caserta to blanch. Disregarding the duke's question, and turning away to avoid the penetrating gaze which he felt burning into the very depths of his soul, he stammered: "Has the Moor arrived?"

"Yon luminary has not passed the zenith!"

"May his tidings be better than his aspect!" Caserta remarked, with a forced smile, retreating so precipitately that he had vanished almost before the duke remarked his absence.

"Weakling — weakling — cursed weakling!" Altamura exclaimed, unable to control himself longer. "Not from probity you resent the bribe, but from pale, quaking fear, detesting treason not for treason's sake, but from abject, skulking cowardice! Ha! If you resist that final repast in store for you, you are not worth the having for emperor or Pope!"

The duke paused with a renewed glance at the moon.

"He will not be here for an hour at least," he muttered, after a brief observation of that luminary. "Zem is as unfailing as death. Meanwhile I long for the caresses of my Francesca, — it seems an eternity since yesterday."

And with a sudden resolution the duke, traversing with hurried, stealthy footsteps the long, arcaded corridors of La Zisa, turned in the direction of the Torre del Diavolo, which he reached in comparatively short time. The sentinel, belonging to the Catalan guard of Crivello, admitted the belated visitor at once, and ascending a narrow, winding stairway to a door, the duke noiselessly entered a chamber lighted only by the pale, ghostly rays of the moon. The soft night wind streaming through the quaint,

oval windows seemed to be the only thing alive or awake in the chamber, so still and tranquil was it within.

But the chamber contained another inmate beside himself.

Reclining on an Oriental ottoman of fantastic design, the interwoven golden flowers of which sparkled strangely in the dusk that pervaded the room, and leaning on her arm lost in deep reverie, the shadowy outlines of Francesca di Lesina's matchless form were dimly visible. The duke approached on tiptoe without causing her to stir, and, kneeling beside her, took her hands and pressed them to his lips.

Francesca turned, and the profound sadness in her countenance sparkled into joy and brightness as she perceived her lover in this attitude of tenderness and devotion.

"You see, my love, how you are always uppermost in my mind," said Ferrando. "But have you thought of my plans, and are you willing to execute your own part therein?"

"Am I not yours? Am I not what you make of me, Ferrando? I have no refuge but to you in any part of my soul! You have not betrayed me, — I have fallen — knowingly, even beneath my own pity and contempt!" returned Francesca, while her head dropped despairingly upon her breast. "But speak on your words of love! There is music in them that lulls the anguish of my soul to rest, as if one of the damned should hear one note from paradise."

"Then tell me that you love me," replied the duke, tenderly. "It is a word that ever lingered on your lips — once. But now — now — I fear you are changed!"

"Oh, if I did not love you, Ferrando, woman and lost

that I am, we would not have met again!" replied the girl, sinking into the outstretched arms of her lover.

"Then — how could you hesitate to lend me your aid in the matter of which I spoke to you?" returned the duke, in tones of mingled tenderness and reproach.

Francesca looked up into the eyes that rested on her face, as if to read their most hidden thoughts.

"But it is strange that you should wish me to counterfeited your kinswoman — play the wanton in her name," she then replied, vehemently. "And yet you have not told me the cause which prompts this strange request."

"The causes are two, — one of state policy; the other a carnival joke. Listen, my Francesca! Of all the knights who journeyed hither on their fool's errand, the envoy of Matteo Visconti honours us with closer attention than all the rest; besides, he loves Helena di Miraval, our kinswoman; sneaks around her bower like a lost soul around the portals of heaven, and she, I fear, is not altogether indifferent to his admiration!"

The duke paused with a sardonic smile and a suggestive shrug of his shoulders.

"You fear — Ferrando?" the lady exclaimed, with flashing eyes and hands convulsively clenched.

"Misunderstand not my meaning, fairest flower of Italy! The Visconti possesses that instinct of distrust, an intuition which is the greatest trait of a statesman. But his suit is not to our liking, and we propose to convince the daring youth that it is not to his own, and that he had best abandon the field. The part I ask of you I cannot ask of one I trust less — you understand, and," continued the duke, slowly and with strange emphasis, "it is her nature you will play, and no assumption. You wrong her not, for methinks all Italy has heard by this time what manner of siren she is."

"If we believed all we heard, Ferrando, if we could even deem it possible," said Francesca, with a burning wildness in her gaze which startled even the duke.

"I speak not now of the lies that are told of us, but of the truths that are told of her," he replied, hastily, and, rising as if to escape the penetrating glance of the woman, he walked up and down the apartment while he continued:

"But since you so dislike the part, only to some few whom I mistrust shall you play it; to the barons of Apulia, whom I expect in all secrecy, you shall be another. You are beautiful — matchlessly beautiful, Francesca, and they are men with an eye for charms like yours. For them you shall be the wife of our castellan, but let not Crivello know the jest till it is well played, for he is a hidalgo and an old Christian! Under this guise we shall invite the barons to a little private collation here in the tower while Crivello is abroad on an errand of mine, and — why stare you so dismally, as if I bade you in all truth to betray me?"

A shrill laugh broke the momentary silence which had succeeded the duke's question, a laugh so ghastly that the very walls seemed to ring and to vibrate.

"Forgive me, Ferrando — I did not know how low I had fallen," Francesca then said, with a fixed look upwards, biting her lips till the blood flowed. "Forgive me, — I am not yet accustomed to be the thing I am, but I will try to remember it. I will abandon myself to it anon, but memory and consciousness — can only death destroy them? Can death? Why, if so, lies he not couched at the base of these battlements?"

"What marvel that I look around in vain for some hope, since they who love me best will not even speak a few words, a few carnival jests, to save the cause for

which I labour—and myself!” exclaimed the duke, mournfully. “Can you dream, sweetheart, that I would permit the vulgar breath of another to profane your beauty? Be it so—I alone will meet them in this castle! Ah, what a meeting it will be! Amazed at beholding one another here,—even if they listen not to my gilded promises,—a universal doubt shall arise amongst them which will paralyze their strength and serve my purposes as well. Senseless that I was! I had even prepared a masked array such as my jealousy of your beauty approved. The garb of the dazzling Fata Morgana, glittering all over with gems as of woven gold-dust, was to adorn my beautiful Francesca, while I thought to witness the adoration your loveliness must provoke humbly following in your train in the guise of a black Nubian slave.”

The duke had concluded his speech with an injured and sorrowful air, avoiding Francesca’s gaze and fixing his eyes on the floor.

“You—you! Why, then, if you love me, and it is no black trick of yours, I will plague you with your own device till you assume your own form again! And if you have any regard for your own escutcheon, methinks, I will overplay the part you have laid out for me, and she whom I am to represent shall be all you wish her to be.”

“I doubt whether all your charms, potent and alluring though they are, will avail aught against him for whose delectation I have arranged this amusement, should he suspect you to be another than the one you are to embody.”

“Is this knight, then, so firmly fixed in his affections that no lady may dare to assail his constancy?”

“Has Crivello never told you of him? He stalks

amongst us as if he were some commissioner sent from above, to turn up the lids of the darkness at whose edge we stand! But for the argus eye of the Catalan I should not have suspected him even to possess the heel of Achilles. But can you wonder? As beautiful a lady as she is, and offering herself with that marvellous unguardedness and warmth for which she is justly renowned? And have you never heard in ballads, Francesca, that slighted love makes a colder nun than all the vows of the eleven thousand virgins of Cologne?"

"I may live to know it," returned the girl, leaning her head thoughtfully on her white arm and gazing into the court beneath, white in the pale moonlight.

"Never — never, unless your love wanders from mine!" said the duke, ardently. "You have been moody and wilful this night, my Francesca, yet I know you understand me and your soul follows the flight of mine, which shows the way. The time is not far when you may share a throne! The king is dreaming of the poet's golden age, — holding discourse with the stars. Let him dream on — till the stars begin to fall! But to return to our plan! You may, disguised and masked, and skilled as you are in imitating the tones and gestures of others, easily assay the Lombard's metal, which perchance is false after all, though it rings so silvery clear. Moreover, we are favoured in our projects by the lady of Miraval's own caprice, for, with the hidden purpose of meeting her lover, she has made known her intention of visiting the great carnival in some unknown disguise. If she can but be made aware of her knight's dancing attendance on our beautiful Fata Morgana, there will be capital fun. As a last resort, we are resolved to try what rivalry will do. For this purpose we hold in readiness our valiant San Severino, blustering ass of the

marshes, who still regards the pigmy rabble of his robbers' den lords of the universe! It shall be a memorable time, this carnival preceding the coronation, and long remembered among men."

Francesca leaned her head against the duke as the latter started to rise.

"I will do your bidding," she said, softly. "I am yours, a thing without a will of its own—do with me as you like, as in bygone times!"

The duke put his arms around the trembling form and tenderly kissed the white brow of the girl.

"I knew my sweetheart would not fail me, and I shall be with you and close at your side, my Francesca. But now I must hasten to despatch some matters of state. I noted not in our love-talk how late the night had waxed. Come! Since your memory carries you back to bygone days so often, I, too, remember that I never used to leave you without a caress that was given and not taken."

The recollection thus touched went to the depths of the girl's heart, and the Duke of Altamura did not leave the Torre del Diavolo without a pledge of tenderness from his fair and loving captive.

The moon was approaching her zenith when the duke retraced his steps toward La Zisa. Dark, fortress-like palaces in the Arabo-Norman style rose towering from luxuriant gardens, and the five-domed cloister of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, with its fantastic brown and terra cotta façade, its scarlet arches and pink cupolas, appeared like the retreat of a magician among tall and waving palms. An avenue of tall cypresses, with an undergrowth of Judas-trees, was a blaze of ruddy amethyst in the pale, ghostly moonlight. The path was carpeted with gray-blue periwinkles, the flowers of death,

and led up toward the grotesque palace. The night-birds were uttering queer shrieks and cries from their shady boughs. The duke glanced again at the moon, and again down the road to the bay, and then reëntered the Saracenic palace. But the most careful scrutiny without, the most thorough investigation within, failed to reveal the person of the African. The expression of disappointment which clouded the duke's brow was soon intensified to one of mingled chagrin and uneasiness. Zem had never failed him before, no matter how difficult the task nor how distant the goal. The duke's gait grew more restless every moment, his vexation not permitting his remaining on one spot. After awaiting in vain his gloomy messenger's arrival, he at last retraced his steps toward the city, conferring upon Zem every epithet in his voluble stores of highly flavoured appellatives.

BOOK THE SECOND

*“ Poi sorridendo disse : io son Manfredi
Nipote di Gostanza Imperadrice :
Ond' io ti prego che, quando tu riedi,
Vadi a mia bella figlia, genitrice
Dell' onor di Cicilia, e d' Aragona,
E dichi a lei il ver, s' altro si dice.*

— DANTE, *Purgatorio*, Canto III., 112-118.

CHAPTER I.

FATA MORGANA

It was on the eve of the following day. The great Ghibelline confederacy was now an accomplished fact, and Manfred was not only in name, but in reality, the leader of the party, both in the North and South. The council had ratified the treaties between the chief Italian principalities and the new Hohenstaufen kingdom without one dissenting vote. Even those opposed at the start had eventually sanctioned the plan proposed by the chancellor, John of Alifé. This was to dismiss the Germans of Landulf of Trent, the new state requiring neither foreign sanction nor auxiliaries, — a motion seconded with unusual warmth by the Duke of Altamura. Galvano Lancia's suggestion, to await the confirmation of Conradino's death, or the result of the election at Viterbo, was overruled; the same fate befell Marino Capece's request to introduce the messenger of the Abbot of Constanx. The party of the Guelphs seemed completely crushed, and even the unaccountable silence and prolonged absence of Count Cenci, Manfred's plenipotentiary at the Conclave, was referred to in a light, bantering tone. The council dissolved so intoxicated with its own triumphs that no countermove from the hostile camp could checkmate its success.

The masking for the great carnival which was to form

the programme of the day had commenced at an early hour, and Ottorino, after leaving the council-hall, wandered through the city, viewing absently the riot and splendour and universal gaiety of these Christian Saturnalia.

At a period of such general dissolution of manners, when in addition to the licentious population of Italy the capital of Sicily was crowded with innumerable foreigners, the confusion was beyond conception, while the magnificent display of luxury surpassed imagination. The visitors, surrounded by all the temptations which luxurious Palermo could offer, abandoned themselves to their unrestrained desires, endeavouring to surpass themselves.

The endless variety of costumes displayed by a multitude assembled from every corner of Italy, Spain, Greece, Africa, and the countries of the North, was now exaggerated by the wild fancifulness and grotesque gaiety of the carnival devices. And though this revelry at its season was common to all nations of the Christian world, it was practised in many different forms, according to influence of climate and national character. The sober, pedantic Northmen beheld with amazement the excesses into which the ardent temperament of the South, released from every shackle, rushed like a foaming torrent, all sparkles, uproar, and glistening tumult. And the Italians, revelling in their own exuberant gaiety, failed not to satirize their visitors with the most laughable buffooneries, ingeniously veiled from the notice of the strangers themselves, as their violence and insolent ignorance were justly to be dreaded.

Passing through streets blazing with banners and pictured tapestries and festooned with flowers and rich ornaments, amid shouts of laughter and ribaldry and roaring

music, Ottorino pursued his way — he knew not whither. He had spent the morning in feverish expectancy of a message from Helena di Miraval, had shut himself up within his apartments that the messenger of love might find him; but he had tarried in vain. No message came, and, almost beside himself at her unaccountable conduct, he had despatched a eunuch to the palace, where, as he had been informed, she resided. The Saracen had delivered the Lombard's appeal into the hands of Helena's tirewoman, who, stating that her mistress was indisposed, promised to place the scroll in her hands and inquired where the reply might reach his master. Thus with his mission but half-fulfilled, the eunuch had returned to Khalesa, and Ottorino had rushed from his gilded chamber as if chased by demons of darkness.

He was not, however, to follow his observations at his own leisure, for he was at once accosted by unwelcome intruders who broke in upon his solitude. The revellers beset him in the most varied shapes. A legion of horned devils with hideous visages and flaming torches surrounded him, imploring his leave to return to hell in order to get out of the noise and clatter of a Christian festival. Deities of all the ancient and modern mythology, known or vaguely guessed at, met and engaged in mock disputes and ribaldry, in which every form of religion was turned into ridicule by men who at other seasons were wrapped in superstitious horrors.

Hardly heeding the strange apparitions which sprang up and disappeared at intervals, Ottorino became involved, he scarcely knew how, in the strange and tumultuous throng which swayed up and down the Cassaro. Wandering amidst the glittering confusion, the Lombard's attention was suddenly caught, with that of many others,

by the approach of a most singular and very magnificent procession.

Down the long and palatial street came a troop of persons in the richest and most glaring Oriental costumes, leaping, dancing, and making the air resound with tambourines, bells, cymbals, and gongs. They kept up an incessant jingle and roar of melody. These heralded a lady, garbed to represent the royal, licentious, and deceptive Fata Morgana, who was thus suitably attended because in Italy all fairies were held to be pagan. She sat in a castle on the back of an elephant, caparisoned with scarlet and gold. The castle was built of little squares and lozenges of burnished looking-glass set in silver frames, and its sparkle and glitter corresponded with the idea entertained of the illusive pomp of the fay. The beautifully moulded figure of the enchantress was amply displayed in her rich garb of gold lace, spangled with rare gems. Her hair was concealed by an immense turban, and her face by the mask of a beautiful woman.

"Viva Morgana" resounded on every side as the strange procession approached, while the fay, distributing innumerable little tokens with which her fairy castle seemed stocked, conversed in a pretended Eastern tongue with the black slave who guided her elephant. The slave was arrayed in great splendour to represent the Caliph of Bagdad, and his face was also concealed by a mask. Wielding a broad and gleaming sabre, he affected the airs of a jealous Oriental, and flourished it among those admirers who pushed too near the lady. But ever and anon he turned back and whispered to some of the maskers whom he seemed to select at random.

From these very signs Ottorino conjectured little good of the fairy, but his interest increased with the recollection that the only elephant in Palermo belonged to

Manfred, a present from the Sultan of Damascus. In his anxiety to ascertain who the lady might be, he pushed eagerly forward. As he approached, the Nubian's eye gleamed upon him from the depths of his mask, and with a screech of joy he muttered some words to the fairy in a tone which was drowned by the uproar of the multitudes.

The fairy immediately signalled her whole retinue to halt, and beckoned so pointedly to Ottorino that he could not doubt that it was he who was distinguished by her summons.

He approached in a fever of curiosity and dread, fearful lest he should find his worst suspicions realized.

"What would you with me, illustrious lady?" said the Lombard, in a voice whose tranquil sternness strangely contrasted, not only with his own overwrought feelings, but also with the frenzied clamour surrounding him.

"Nay — what would you with me, signor?" replied the fairy, in tones whose low, liquid, and perfidious sweetness resembled those of a siren luring the mariner to death. "I am the fairy Fata Morgana, all things to all men — even what their own desires would have! To the soldier, glory; to the priest, dominion; to the poet, immortality; to the lover, his mistress; to every madness its fitting frenzy. Name thou thine, signor, that it may forthwith be gratified."

"Nay, fairy, since thou art as fallacious as the waves on which thou raisest thy translucent palaces, so bright without, so dismal within, I care not to trust myself to thy treacherous bowers," said the Lombard. "Yet — if thou canst aid me in my research, I will confess that I seek for one whom I would not find."

"Then thou art truly my lord and master, for I have come here to choose a seraglio among all the modest

beauties of thy sex, and justly, methinks, thou art therein entitled to the foremost place; therefore mount and accompany me on my elephant, which already kneels of its own grace and understanding."

The prodigious creature did, indeed, at a signal from the Nubian's wand, bend its massive knees to the pavement, and with a huge yawn seemed to await the result of the conference.

"Queen and sorceress," replied Ottorino, "the order of all nature is too strangely reversed in thy kingdom for me to venture in it while I still walk erect; even Circe changed men into swine ere she put them in her sties. Moreover, the disappearances from thy seraglio are so numerous and so tragic that it is conjectured by some that there is a hidden snake therein."

After having spoken these words, ringing with the anguish of his soul, Ottorino stared at the fairy as if to ascertain their effect.

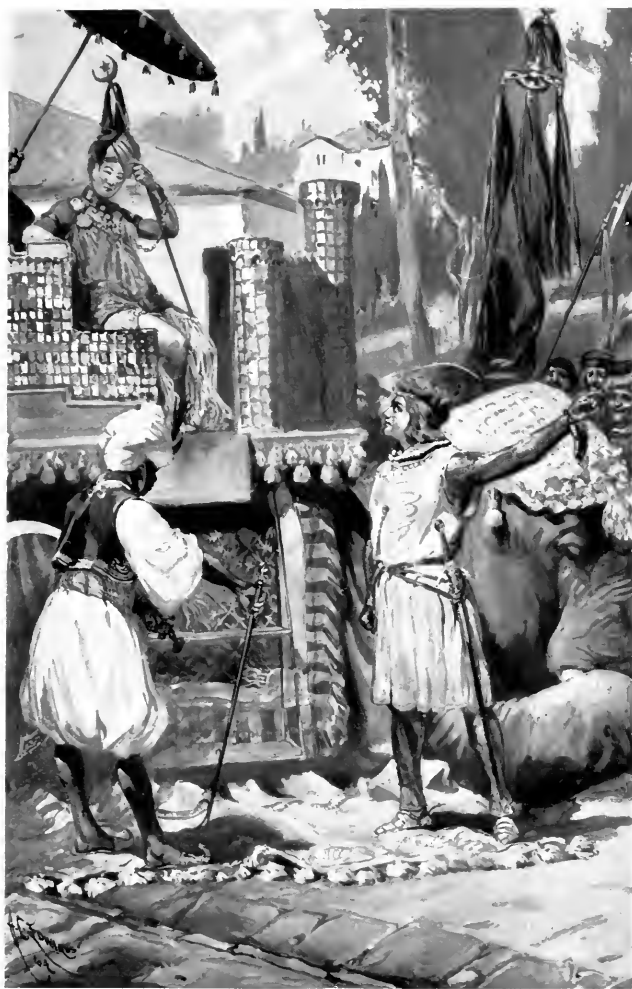
"And yet I have never loved till now," sighed the Fata Morgana, "else I would long ago have made a charm to stiffen that green reptile — jealousy!"

The words, spoken in low, plaintive tones in the voice he loved so well, almost drove the Visconti to frenzy.

"If thou hast never loved, then thou hast not even a base apology for being the vile thing thou art," he returned, severely. "Go on thy way, as I will on mine — and may our paths cross never again!"

"I must seek those, then, who are not so wise, or so foolish, as to refuse the quaff of pleasure because other lips have been to the goblet," returned the enchantress, gaily; then with a haughty gesture she commanded the Nubian to advance, and the procession moved on.

Ottorino felt as if his heart were crumbling to dust, and so absorbing was the mute anguish that he fairly



“GO ON THY WAY, AS I WILL ON MINE”

started when he felt his mantle plucked, and, turning, beheld the Nubian.

"Signor — believing your obduracy might relent, the most puissant Fata Morgana desires you to accept her portrait in this case," said the African, producing an exquisitely chased gold medallion, which he handed to the Visconti, attentively watching him as he examined it. Pressing a spring, the case flew open, and Ottorino staggered as if he had been dealt a deadly blow.

"My God! it is true, then—it is true!" he cried, despairingly, then, with a glance so menacing that the Nubian involuntarily receded a step or two, he hurled the medallion with such force to the ground that it broke into countless fragments.

"Return to her who has sent thee, and tell her what thou hast seen," and without vouchsafing him another word he turned his back upon the Nubian, while the groups which surrounded them laughed and jeered, believing the whole to be a preconcerted scene.

Summoning all his resolutions not to let the fearful revelation overcome him, Ottorino continued aimlessly upon his way. It would have been scarcely possible to analyze the confusion of emotions which filled the Visconti's heart,—fury, anger, disdain, jealousy, hate, and love. Fevered with agitation and despair, he endeavoured to avoid the surging crowds. Only one resolution stood out bold and unshaken in the wild chaos of anguish and wrath which upheaved his soul, the resolve to return to his Northern lakes and to forget the brief and illusive dream of happiness. Forget—forget! When the soul forgets that there has been a yesterday, that there will be a to-morrow — then and not until then is forgetfulness complete.

How he had loved her! Loved as he could never, never

love again! He had believed Helena's confession to be as sincere as his own, and now her licentious coquetry in the character of the royal sorceress confirmed the worst rumours and gave grounds for even darker accusations.

Suddenly, as the vesper-bells of remote cloisters chimed fitfully above the roar of a tempest, as their peaceful clangour, though dissipated, hovered with faint echoes on the storm-rent air, so her warning in that never-to-be-forgotten night at Favara rang through his heart: "If once you doubt, we are both lost — you and I."

With an impatient gesture he relegated the speech to the dead, for at that precise moment the scene in the wilds of Monte Pellegrino rose before him. The mental agonies of the Dominican — might they not be the viper's stings of secret remorse? There were moments in his meditation when he blamed himself for not having accepted the fay's invitation, that he might have ascertained her full depravity and humbled her with a scorn and refusal, which, if aught could, would strike shame and dismay into her haughty soul. It did not occur to Ottorino that the experiment might have had its perils.

It was now drawing toward sunset, and the deepening purple of the sky mellowed the glaring tints into an almost bewildering richness. The moon gleamed pale as an alabaster lamp in the still sun-ruled heavens, and the light trembled luminously on the waters of the fountains. Stung to his soul and rankling with the darts of those poisoned wasps of passion, the Lombard was in a most unsociable mood. But on entering an avenue of cypress-trees he found himself face to face with the Dominican. The pale and haggard countenance of the monk bore traces of severest mental agony. In his present frame of mind this kindled the Visconti's contempt instead of pity, and the salutation was sufficiently

cold on both sides. After a few preliminary remarks, the Dominican stated that he felt bound in return for a kindness, the nature of which he left to Ottorino's surmise, to inform the latter that his life ran an hourly risk in Palermo, as he had provoked the vengeance of one whom nothing but blood could appease.

"I fear, and not without reason," concluded the friar, "that an insult so glaring as the public scorn to which you have subjected the proudest lady in Palermo has exasperated her to that pass at which her smiling lips have ever been found most deadly."

"Proud — deadly!" exclaimed Ottorino. "But I deem the lady is at present too much absorbed in peopling her seraglio to give immediate attention to the horrors which are said to be her customary pastime."

"Be it so, since thou wilt not listen to the voice of the charmer, charm he ever so wisely," replied the friar, after a pause. "But if thou meetest with some misfortune, the blame is not with me, nor canst thou altogether doubt the hand from whence it comes."

Ottorino made no reply, but after the Dominican had continued on his way, he dwelt with continually deepening wrath and pain on the probability that Helena abhorred him, and that her momentary liking had changed into a desire for revenge. Yet in spite of the threats held out to him, in spite of his own fatigue and disgust, the Visconti found himself again borne along on the turbulent waves of the carnival, surrounded by tumultuous revellers, who, laughing, gibbering, brawling in all the effervescence of boundless delight, swarmed on their way toward the groves by the sea.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAD GIRL

THE sunlight had flooded with its parting rays the Conca d'Oro when Ottorino reached the myrtle and cypress groves, near the entrance to the Norman palaces of Roger and William. The Lombard followed a narrow, winding path, at times hardly discernible owing to the overgrowth of mosses and grass, until he found himself before a dilapidated building, which, from its size and shape, was evidently a monastery, hidden in the green of the vale. But if it ever had been such, it was now deserted. The building, with its architraves and high arched windows, was a quaint mixture of the Arabo-Norman style, so common to the Sicilian architecture of that period. An old, quaintly carved door stood ajar, but not a sound of life broke the stillness.

At the end of a narrow lane, bordered by vineyards and overshadowed by huge plane-trees, around whose gigantic trunks grapevines and evergreens twined their tiny arms, Ottorino beheld a girlish figure. The girl stared motionless down the lane, then, uttering a wild, piercing cry, she disappeared so suddenly that for some moments he wondered if he had waked from a dream and the apparition was part thereof, or if he had really seen it.

Something in the terrified outcry of the creature before

him confirmed the Visconti's belief that he had seen a being of flesh and blood. But going into the dense copse in which the girl had disappeared, he looked in vain for her retreating form.

Fully convinced that the maiden, whoever she may have been, must have sought refuge in this by no means inviting retreat, and apprehensive lest some dark mystery encompass so unusual an occurrence, the Visconti approached the low balcony which surrounded the house. This balcony led into a chamber almost on a level with it, a large but ruinously dilapidated apartment, into which the doors of a suite of smaller rooms opened, all apparently in similar condition. The few articles of furniture were in a state of mouldering decay, showing that they had long been out of use. The silence in these chambers was so deep that after a moment's intent listening Ottorino concluded that the fugitive had not taken refuge in any of them. As he investigated more closely, he saw the dark, massive posts of a staircase, which probably descended into an inhabited part of the house. On approaching, he perceived that the descent was abrupt and steep as a ladder, with scarcely room for the action of the limbs. It was necessary to descend backwards, and, while brave and fearless, Ottorino yet hesitated before the alternative of returning or adopting such a means of descent, uncertain as he was of what might await him below, not knowing into what sort of abode he was penetrating. But hearing no sound from below, and getting no reply from his halloos, anxiety and curiosity alike urged him on. He looked around for some material with which to throw light into the abysmal darkness, and at last discovered the fragments of a torch, the appearance of which convinced him that it was not so long ago since it had been lighted. Striking a light with two flint-

stones he found near by, he boldly began the descent in quest of the strange apparition which had so mysteriously fled before his approach.

Descending, he soon found the wall behind breaking off, and, unwilling to run the chances with his back turned and arms powerless, he dropped the remainder of the steps. He had brushed his torch so rudely in the scramble of the fall that it was some moments before he could fan it into a light sufficiently strong to second his investigation. What he then saw confirmed the suspicions and conjectures which he had formed from the scent of drugs and herbs, and it was evident that he was in the abode of an alchemist, to whom this habitation, formerly dedicated to different purposes, now belonged. Dusty jars, phials emblazoned with mystic characters, stuffed lizards, a mummy, serpents, and various strange animals preserved in liquids, many of them dried and shrivelled, a rusty copper basin, cauterizing-irons, and other implements of surgery, filled the room. A leaden table, massive and shapeless as a butcher's block and covered with cabalistical designs and figures, from which to calculate the favourable instant of swallowing medicines or performing operations, was in the centre of the room. The dusty and neglected aspect of the whole pharmacy indicated that the owner either had not many calls on his skill, or followed a profession more lucrative. No living soul appeared, and there seemed to be no exit save by a strongly barred door and a casement closed with iron panels. After a glance over the medicinal wares, the Visconti concluded that the object of his search, if she was in this dismal abode, must have remained above. In this belief he was about to remount the stairs, when he distinctly heard what seemed to him a sob or sigh from beneath the spot where he stood. Glancing around, he

perceived a pale glimmer in a large chimneyplace behind, though there was assuredly no fire in it. Stumbling in his haste over some old crucibles, he was astonished to find that the light fell from what appeared to be an open trap-door in the back wall of the chimney. The light revealed a flight of narrow stairs.

More than ever piqued by curiosity, and insensible to the fears which would have restrained most men from gratifying the former under such conditions, Ottorino started to climb the steps, taking only the precaution of leaving his torch alight, and sticking it in one of the numerous cracks between the stones of the chimney.

Stooping nearly double in order to enter the trap-door, he perceived a broader flight of stairs down the inside of a wall. At the right a dark chamber extended, dimly lighted by some embers glowing on the opposite hearth. This feeble radiance flickered up occasionally, and showed that the vault—for it was little better—was filled with strange heaps of lumber, like the contents of a cave in which wreckers had stowed the pillage of a drowned armada. But the Visconti's attention was immediately absorbed by the apparition of a young maiden whose Oriental features betokened her to be of Moorish or Saracenic descent. She was crouching near the hearth and listening with head erect, like a deer in covert. Her expression was a strange mixture of reason and insanity, and there was such a degree of wildness and vacuity in her eyes that Ottorino involuntarily paused to reflect whether he should continue upon his course or retreat.

Uncertain as to the effect which his appearance might produce, the Visconti lingered on the summit of the stairs. But during that pause a momentary gleam lighted up his black garb, and the girl perceived him. Instantly she sprang up and uttered a cry of absolute despair.

There was now but a choice of evils, and Ottorino preferred that of descending slowly into the vault, at the same time exhorting the frightened girl not to be alarmed, announcing that his intentions were merely to ascertain that she was threatened with no danger from without.

The first tones of Ottorino's voice seemed to reassure her, and, looking up, she suddenly changed her cries into a wild peal of laughter, clasped her hands as if in ecstasy, and rushed to meet him. As suddenly, however, she paused, staring at him in amazement, as if struck by his lofty stature or his dark armour.

Ottorino's eyes in turn scanned the form of the girl before him. Her face and form might have been taken for a perfect model of Oriental beauty but for the pallid hues which overspread the dark tints of her complexion, and the drooping and meagre lines of the figure, otherwise so finely moulded. The girl was attired in a dusty and disordered garb, originally of fine silk, but so curiously ornamented with ribbons, shreds of different colours, and what appeared to be gems of purest water, that the Visconti at first fancied that he beheld one of those unhappy outcasts put forth to attract licentious observation and to lure travellers into their haunts for the purpose of enriching themselves. Her countenance, young, wasted, and pallid, strengthened this impression, but a further consideration at least staggered it. The vacant depths of her eyes, the unmeaning smile with which she watched the advancing steps of the stranger, the fantastic richness of her garniture, exceeding in glare and contrast every vagary even of Moorish fancy, suggested to the Visconti characteristics of insanity. But perhaps it was one of those ornaments, a chain of coins twisted in the black, disordered hair, which chiefly attracted his attention, and yet he knew not at the time why he noticed it at all.

"But is it really you?" the girl exclaimed, after a moment's profound silence. "It is long, indeed, since we have met; but you are so tall, or are you — what are you?"

"I am the knight you met in the arbour," replied Ottorino, in his gentlest tones, in order not to arouse her fright. "I came hither to see that no harm had befallen you, as your sudden flight led me to fear."

"No, no, no! It is not he! He will never come again," softly murmured the girl to herself. "And yet he had a voice very much like yours, so full of that silvery ring that spoke to my heart. Do not mock me, Enrico! Why needed you to come in this disguise? For indeed, beloved, I will not reproach you, never tell you what I have thought of your long absence and how I have wept my brain so dry that I can never, never weep again! Speak, dearest, speak! You need not think the wizard will suspect — he flew away at early dawn! I heard his wings rustle over the cypress-trees. And the witches — they are gone, too; the black he-goat pulled them away, he with the long horns and eyes like glowing coals. And they tell me you are gone, too, and dead, — nay, if you will not answer me I will fetch a light and look into your face; I shall know it, if it be ever so pale, — but no, no, no! He is dead — dead — dead!"

"Enrico!" the Visconti repeated to himself with a start. It was the name of the emperor's murdered son. Was there another, or stood he at the brink of the dark mystery which had so long baffled the empire?

Deep and intense was the pause while the Moorish girl, clinging with the tenacity of the mind diseased to its favourite visions, hurried to the hearth, and, after groping for some moments, lighted a lamp shaped like a twisted

dragon, and returned with great eagerness to the Visconti.

Quietly awaiting the result of her scrutiny, Ottorino stood in silence and suffered her to survey him from head to foot. But after gazing long and wistfully into his face, the girl shook her head, and with a deep sigh set the lamp down.

"You see I am not he — but for whom did you mistake me and what is your name?" said Ottorino, gently, but perhaps too earnestly, for the girl looked at him with sudden suspicion and alarm.

"What do you want with him? To betray him to the scarlet man with the burning eyes and the ashen face?" she said, bitterly, adding with a wild, triumphant laugh:

"But you cannot! I have hidden him too well for any of you to find him, nor shall you touch him until you have torn out my heart, for I will shriek and shriek until your God has heard as well as Allah. And he is good and just and merciful, or you Christians — you Christians — ah! he is dead — dead — dead!"

She rested her chin in her hand and seemed endeavouring to recall the words of some one, while Ottorino's mind was occupied with the expression she had uttered relating to the scarlet man.

"What is peace?" murmured the girl, probably referring to some disconnected train of thought which fluttered through her disordered brain. "Is it death? For when he was dead, with all those cruel stabs, how calm he lay!"

There was a brief pause, during which the Moorish girl looked vacantly at the knight.

"Were you decked out as gaily as now when the scarlet man was here?" he said at last, with hesitation.

"It was not here, you know, but in the chamber above;

they brought him here too, but it was in my dream," replied the girl. "Indeed,—it was a dreadful dream. But I was much finer than I am now, for they all loved me then and thought pearls and gems too mean for me to wear, and I had no delight but to dress myself in the prettiest things and to braid my hair when I knew he was coming."

"And was your dream so sad? I pray you tell it to me, whatever your name may be, for you see I am of a melancholy turn of mind, and I love to hear sad tales," said the Lombard.

"Call me Leila,—Leila, that is what he used to call me. But I may not tell it to you, nor to any one else; the witches will murder me," replied the girl. "But it was very horrible! To hear the blood go drop, drop, drop,—to see them all run in upon him with their long, keen poniards and press them into his poor quivering flesh, while thousands and thousands of voices—oh, how I shrieked, how I shrieked—murder—murder—murder! Until the roof rang like the clatter of hoofs at the tournament, where I saw him first. But my voice died in my throat,—my voice would not sound. Knight, you are wearing a beggar's harness, compared to him that day. I stole out when they were busy and the embers flaming, but to see them lift him up so drenched in blood that it ran down his bright, golden hair,—for when he was dead he could not keep his head up,—I remember."

"But who was your Enrico, who wore such noble armour? And did you dream that he was murdered here and by your people?" said the Visconti, in careless tones, which he thought would disarm the poor mad girl's suspicions.

"No,—it was all a dream, and I will some day be

punished for remembering it," said the girl, with profound sadness, and tears trickled fast but unheeded down her pale, wan face, as she seemed to sink into a puzzled reverie.

The Visconti awaited the result in silence, hoping that some clearer revelation might rise in her chaotic memory. But suddenly she raised her eyes, wiped the tears away, and looked at him with an expression of mingled suspicion and dread.

"But you are not like the serpent," she faltered, at length, "that came and questioned me with his oily tongue, and whispered lies of him and said he loved another better far, and challenged me to win him from his appointment with her that very night; but it was only one of the wizard's demons, you must know, for when he came they murdered him."

"Loved another — and who was she? What did men call her?"

"Oh, she was so beautiful that indeed it was a scorpion in my breast to hear it said. Have you not, come from what land you will, heard of her unrivalled beauty?"

"But her name, Leila — her name, whom your Enrico preferred to you!"

"No, no, no! 'Tis false! He came, he came!" shrieked the girl, her eyes flashing through her tears. "You are a devil, too, to belie him thus, for when I told him what the serpent visage said —"

"Ay, — what did he answer then?"

"Hush, did you not hear a step?" interrupted the girl, staring wildly and tossing back her black hair to listen.

"Embers sinking upon the hearth. But tell me, Leila, what said he when you did upbraid him with his inconstancy?"

"That was the very way they came! I heard them creeping up the stairs and whispering, and thought it was but the wind," replied the girl, raising her slender finger with a wildly startled look. "But you are not asleep, as he was. And he looked so beautiful in his sleep that it ever grieved me to waken him when the pale dawn looked in through the windows; though I know the witches would have killed him had they found him there."

"But what said he to your gentle jealousies, fair Leila? Did he smile?" reiterated Ottorino, with singular pertinacity.

"Nay, — I knew not till then that he could look so terrible, and he swore that he would slay the fiend who told me so, if I could show him who he was. But even as he spoke — hark! There are muffled feet coming up the stairs."

"We are below stairs here, remember, poor Leila," said the Visconti, with deep pity in his tones. "But who was this Enrico of yours, that he boasted of such power over life and death? Some great lord, doubtless — was he one of the Geracci, or the Corvaja, or a knight of the empire?"

"Not the proudest knight in the king's court was worthy to hold my Enrico's stirrups," returned the Moorish girl, with enthusiasm. "He was so good, so beautiful, so brave, and when he looked into my eyes my soul dissolved in happiness. But I dreamed of him long, long before I saw him, and there was no joy for me when I saw him not. Yet it was all a dream, else, being so great a lord, why did he never tell me more of his name than Enrico? But what needed I to know more?" she continued, after a pause. "He was himself — even if he had no name at all!"

"But if you did love him so, Leila, would you not revenge his cruel murder?" said Ottorino. "Does it not darken the sunshine to you when you see those who were his assassins smiling at one another with the sweet recollection of their bloody vengeance?"

"Nay, they were demons in masks raised by the wizard," said the girl, musingly. "He has flown away to meet the dark spirits on Mount Eblis. They were demons, I tell you, — all but one, — and Enrico tore the mask from his face to show me how it had turned to palest ashes, paler than the hues of a pine-wood fire when the morning shines upon it."

"But that one — that one!" exclaimed the Visconti, impatiently. "Were you to behold his face again — surely you have not forgotten that one?"

"I tell you again they were all devils, raised from the night of death to tear him to pieces, for they laughed and held me while it was all done," returned the girl, pettishly, watching her interrogator with a vacant sort of curiosity, and carelessly weaving into ringlets her long black hair.

"But after they killed him, what did they with the gashed body?" Ottorino returned, after a moment's musing.

"Oh, I will show you very soon, — I found out the trick when it was too late," Leila replied, with sudden vivacity, darting toward the massive wardrobe elaborately welded with brass, which occupied a corner of the dismal chamber. The girl then pulled a chain which raised an iron bolt, and by the light of the lamp which she hastened to bring Ottorino saw with amazement that a stream of water flowed past beneath the house.

"And whither flows this dark stream?" he asked,

looking up both ways and seeing that the covered way extended without apparent exit on either side.

"Only the rats know that, and the Moors," replied the girl, with a smile of simple cunning, as if she had discovered and were baffling some intended trick.

"Hear me, Leila," said the Visconti, a thought occurring to him. "You see, my arm is strong. You are but fooled into the belief that demons slew your beautiful lover, — some rival among the Christians has slain him, perchance even for the love of that fair lady of whom you were told. Now, if you will hold yourself ready to go with me yonder to the city, and if amidst all the crowds you can or will point out to me that one who slew your lover, — I swear to you by your God and mine that I will avenge him so that even you shall cry out 'Enough!'"

The girl shook her head.

"I cannot see them; I go to no feasts, and it is a long time since I have seen the city, — they will not let me go. I can see the cupolas and the spires and the belfries — but the witches, you know!" she replied, with evidently startled attention. "And if I stir out of the house they will kill me as they killed him," the girl continued, with a deep sigh. "They say I am crazed, and must not even stir as far as yon tall pine-tree; I may not even show my eyes to the world, which were brighter far before I wept them away."

"But if you are crazed, my girl, — if they say you are, it is the wont of madness to love wandering, and that may plead your apology if even those who guard you discover that you have flown," expostulated the Lombard.

"Hi, hi, hi, hi! But how folk would laugh to see the Christian knight and the Moorish girl together, and hoot at me and stone us both — for so Enrico said," replied

the girl, with a faint, hysteric giggle, stopped by a veritable shower of tears, which ran through her fingers while she covered her face with both hands. So piteous were her grief and her sobs that the knight, softly caressing the poor, dark-haired girl, eventually succeeded in calming her perturbed spirit.

"But no one will note us in the confusion of the city, my gentle Leila," he said. "And if they should, it is the office and duty of every true knight to shield and succour all women, be their nation or their creed what it has pleased the Almighty God to make it."

"And will you indeed with your strong arm avenge Enrico?" Leila replied, hurriedly. "For it is he I was looking for in the arbour."

"Enrico," repeated the knight, as if struck at this reversion of an obstinate idea.

"Yes; for I said in my heart, he will come and see me and remember what we have spoken to each other, and then he must needs take pity on me; at least he will tell me why he despises the poor girl that loves him so much that he never even said, 'Leila, I am weary of thee,' " said the Moorish girl, mournfully. "Why should he not even tell me why he scorned me — why he never wished to see me again? Perchance they have told him lies of me, as they will ever of poor souls who love so much that they know not how to hide it; but then, it needs only a word to set all right again when truth is listened to."

"Wherefore, then, will you not go with me and seek him out?" said Ottorino, clinging to this new idea. "How can you hope to see him and tell him your truths penned up in this dark prison where he never comes?"

Leila looked at her adviser with a sort of wondering

doubt, but suddenly, her eyes and features kindling with rage, she cried out:

"Devil! I know you now! You are he who came before as the leaden-visaged Spanish liar, for all you are so changed! They have sent you to find out where Enrico is, — and then my dream will all come true."

Confounded with this new turn, Ottorino stood for some moments in irresolute silence, scarcely noticing a slight murmur, which immediately attracted the attention of the girl.

"They come — they come!" she whispered, in a breathless undertone, startled with some degree of sane recollection. "Fly — fly — or we shall both be murdered!"

Whisperings of several voices and sounds as of unlocking the door of the shop were distinctly audible, and brave as the Lombard was, he was by no means insensible to the dangers of being surrounded by numbers under circumstances which would rouse the passions of the people, who, if they thought him an enemy, would use every effort at his destruction.

"Whither does this strange passage lead?" Ottorino asked of Leila, after a brief pause.

"To the marshes!" replied the girl, wringing her hands. "They come — they come! They will not believe us — they will murder you — and call me vile names — follow the stream — the stream — fly — fly!"

"I will only depart on condition that you give me the promise to see me again and come with me to the city," returned the Visconti.

"Yes — yes — I will wait for you here and go with you, even if they kill me, indeed — indeed — I swear it," said the girl, endeavouring with her feeble force to draw him to the exit.

"Swear to me by all your hopes of again seeing your lover — your Enrico — in heaven or on earth," insisted Ottorino, hastening his own movements toward the door.

"I swear — I swear!"

"But you will forget! Promise me not once to look upon this strange portal without remembering your pledge."

"I will — I will! It is not deep," Leila exclaimed, as Ottorino took the lamp and threw its radiance on the rapid waters of the channel. "On — on!"

The Lombard indeed hesitated in descending the two or three steps which led to the channel, for a momentary suspicion of treachery flashed through his mind when he glanced down the watery way. But the anxious solicitude of the mad girl reassured him, and with a farewell pressure of Leila's hand he descended the steps.

"I will take your lamp," he said, with a smile, "for they will scold you for losing it, and then you will remember your pledge."

The girl made no reply but by a strange laugh, in which fear seemed to mingle with joy at the knight's retreat, and she closed the opening with such rapidity that he was barred out before he had finished speaking.

He found himself perched on a loose step partially laved by the waters as they passed. The channel at this point was not deep, unless its exceeding purity deceived the eye. Voices of men speaking confusedly in raised and indignant tones in a tongue unknown to him were now audible, and apprehending more for the safety of the girl than his own, if the gleam of the light should be observed through the chinks, Ottorino shaded it and stepped into the water.

It was deeper than he had at first conjectured, flowing over his knees, but reconnoitring as he advanced, he



“‘PROMISE ME NOT ONCE TO LOOK UPON THIS STRANGE
PORTAL WITHOUT REMEMBERING YOUR PLEDGE’”

began to muse on the probability that the stream would terminate in some deep cistern or reservoir. The dark thought came to him that perhaps he was barred in a place from which there was no exit, and where he might miserably perish. He knew that the importance of the secret he had discovered would drive the inmates of the place, in case of his discovery, to desperation, and that a return to the place from which he had come would be impossible.

Still it was not likely that a project so malignant and treacherous would enter the mind of the mad girl. Ottorino advanced, uncertain as to what was in store for him. As he went his imagination conjured up so vivid a vision of the dismal tragedy, that the flashes of the lamp in the water seemed as if they were streaks of blood speeding past. Perhaps it was still but a part of the imagination of his excited organs, but it seemed to him as if he heard remote shouts and cries, above all of which rang Leila's voice, repeating her "Fly — fly!" in accents of frantic warning. Whether she was indeed urging on his flight, or merely giving way to the vagaries of delirium, he could not know. Nevertheless he hastened onward until he had reached an arch at the extremity of the dead wall. This he passed without difficulty, startling the waterfowl which had built their nests on the lonely shores. Avoiding the numerous pools of stagnant water, Ottorino soon found himself in the densely peopled Cassaro.

His brain was whirling with the knowledge which he had so mysteriously gained. Had fate itself brought him face to face with the dire mystery enshrouding the death of the emperor's wayward son? And if this murdered lover of the Moorish girl was indeed the golden-haired Hohenstaufen, who was that fairest of women who had shared his love with the poor demented girl? An icy

chill ran through his veins — but no — no! Yet — was it not possible that the jealousy of an enraged woman, the fury of a rival, the ambition of a false friend, might have wrought the dismal tragedy? The only possible solution of this direful riddle, the only possible light to be obtained, seemed to glimmer in the evanescent flashes of Leila's half-extinguished intellect.

Racked with contending emotions, Ottorino hastened onward. So absorbed was he in his dark ruminations that he almost stumbled over a female figure in the garb of Alecto, seated on a broken column near the ruins of an ancient temple. In the momentary glimpse which he caught, ere she could replace her mask, the Visconti beheld a countenance which corresponded in its statuesque beauty and gloom with that of the fury whom its owner impersonated.

"Divinity of Tartarus, may I pass without the offence you know so well how to avenge?" Ottorino faltered, for he had been suddenly struck with the resemblance of the woman before him to the Fata Morgana.

"If that be Greek for hell, in Italian it is memory," returned Alecto, with intense and seemingly irrepressible bitterness. "Pardon me, signor, — let me not detain you. You are doubtlessly as eager a worshipper of beauty as all the rest of mankind — ah! I dreamed not she was so beautiful!"

"There is something in your tone, signora, — nay, look not away, — there is something in your tone that revives a memory that we have met before," Ottorino replied, in a voice which he in vain endeavoured to steady.

"Trust neither memory nor mask," the mysterious woman replied, and ere the Lombard could inquire into the meaning of her strange words she had disappeared, leaving him alone to ponder over her enigmatic speech.

CHAPTER III.

THE COUNCIL

THE council-chamber of the Hohenstaufen palace was flooded by the dazzling rays of the noonday sun. Around a table, on which papers of state, parchments, and scrolls lay in confusion, were seated five men engaged in deep and serious converse.

They were Giordano and Galvano Lancia, Conrad and Marino Capece, and John of Procida, one of the foremost Palermitans at court.

It was before the hour appointed for the meeting of the council, and the loyal adherents of the Suabian dynasty had by silent accord assembled, before the presence of discordant elements should make discussion hazardous or impossible.

"You cannot rule Italians with Platonic principles, nor with tenets of Pythagorean philosophy," said Galvano Lancia. "Manfred dreams, and it is time a warning note were sounded."

"It is the temperament of the Hohenstaufen, — trustful and true, — so was the dead emperor before him, until treachery in his own household changed his sunny nature to a less trustful one. Let the king but look around — where are the pillars, the support of the realm? The Italians love him — so loved the Romans Gracchus. He

trusts to the barons. They are great because their ancestors were traitors to William the Norman, and their sons will be great because their sires were traitors to Manfred."

"A dark fate rules the imperial house, and Manfred may not avert it," said John of Procida. "His court is the high seat of minstrelsy and love, and he ignores the maxim of the shrewd Roman, '*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*' The Germans have departed, though Landulf of Trent still tarries. The trusty legions of the North should have been retained at any cost."

"Thus it was ever," interposed Marino Capece. "What brought Otto, the imperial youth, to his untimely grave, but his fantastic dreams, revived in some dread midnight hour in the imperial vaults of Aix-la-Chapelle?"

"I like not the sultry stillness,—the ominous hush foretells the hurricane," said John of Procida. "Where is the news from Rome,—what intelligence from Viterbo? Has the Conclave spoken? Is it still hatching the egg of contention? Where is Count Cenci? Where is the nuncio, with the confirmation of the grants?"

"In Northern lands, where the skulls are thicker and the brains less exposed to the rays of the sun," Giordano Lancio replied, pensively, "ebb and tide of kingdoms may be foretold, but not so on this volcanic soil. Those who cheer for you to-day may jeer at you to-morrow. The strife between Guelph and Ghibelline is as old as the Alps, whose glittering mountain crests an all-wise Providence has set up, a barrier between Northern ambition and Southern vindictiveness. How many peoples has the avalanche of centuries hurled into the blooming garden of Italy? The Cimbri, and Teutoni, Alans and Avars, the Vandals, the Goths, the Franks—where are they to-day? As long as they served the end of Rome, Rome

permitted them to vegetate. There is not room for an emperor and Pope on Italian soil."

At this moment the folding-doors of the council-hall opened, revealing the king in his usual state, surrounded by the high officers of the court, while an unusual number of Apulian nobles was gathered in the centre of the hall of audience. The Duke of Altamura's arrival seemed to be waited for, and many significant glances were exchanged between the barons when he entered and saluted the king with profound and almost cringing respect. Yet the countenance of the duke reflected a vexation, which, despite his self-control, did not escape the penetrating gaze of his neighbour, the hunchback chancellor, and it was difficult to determine whether the green serpent eyes of John of Alifé reflected concern over the shadows on the duke's clouded brow, or beamed with malignant joy at the high constable's apparent discomfiture.

The deliberations of the council were well under headway, and a spirit of singular unison met every proposition emanating from the throne, when without warning the draperies opposite the royal dais were torn asunder, and a shapeless mass, resembling at first sight a black ball, was hurled almost directly at the king's feet. The thing fell with a dull thud, uttering a cry which, so far from possessing a human ring, resembled rather the howl of a wounded hyena or a jackal of the desert.

With a cry of horror every one sprang from their seats, while those nearest recoiled with unfeigned terror from this monstrous surprise. As it lay motionless on the mosaic, it was seen to be the body of an African with its most repulsive attributes. Securely tied with a lasso, which secured arms and limbs, the shapeless form had been bent almost double. The eyes protruded

from their inflamed sockets, and the heavy lips twitched and quivered as if in pain.

Directly upon the heels of this monstrous surprise there appeared between the draperies a very giant in height and breadth, clad in dark, steel-coloured armour. From his bared head over his shoulders flowed locks of silvery white and bleached with age.

A suppressed whisper went from mouth to mouth: "The Duke of Lesina — the Duke of Lesina." Manfred, who had risen from his seat with the rest, had not regained composure sufficient to inquire into the meaning of this extraordinary scene.

Unattended by aught but his own pride and stateliness, the banished chieftain stalked into the presence of his great enemy. Only in his knit brows and compressed lips showed the strife of passions within his soul; but when his gaze met that of the Duke of Altamura, whose countenance was so ghastly pale and horror-stricken that he could do but little more than stare speechlessly at the intruder, the Duke of Lesina's pent-up passions swept away all barriers of restraint.

"Dost thou own him, thou cursed viper?" he roared, pointing to the apparently lifeless carcass, while his eyes blazed furious wrath on the high constable. "Dost thou acknowledge the tool of thine infamy, traitor and abductor? Ha! For once the web of thy schemes was not fine enough to blind and deceive these old eyes, which have traced this ghoul to his very lair."

It was Manfred who, barely recovered from the surprise which held all present spellbound, broke into the intruder's speech.

"By the splendour of God, Duke of Lesina — have your gray hairs deprived you of your senses? Else what

means this unprecedented insult to your king and the council of the realm?"

The Duke of Lesina fearlessly faced the king; his stupendous stature seemed even to expand under the strain of suppressed excitement, as, bowing low, he calmly replied:

"If the Duke of Lesina, now under the ban of the realm, has forfeited his life, he is ready to pay the penalty, but not until he has brought down the vengeance of heaven on yonder miscreant. Behold him, son of Frederick, behold the blanched traitor and this jackal of the desert, his ghoulish coadjutor, the instrument of his deeds of darkness, — and may his master be as ready to account for his acts as I, the Duke of Lesina, for mine."

The words of the white-haired baron, who faced the assembly more like a judge than a petitioner, carried such conviction with them that Manfred turned to the Duke of Altamura, pointing with a gesture of undisguised disdain to the shapeless mass on the floor.

"You have heard the impeachment, duke — we await your reply!"

"It is my runner, King Manfred," replied the duke, whose consternation had gradually given way to unbounded fury. "The king's Majesty is aware of the disorders in Calabria. We cannot clean a pigsty with a silver fork, nor can we trap bandits with pages in silken doublets. Like to like; Ghino's own followers will be instrumental in bringing about his downfall, and for these ends I employ this trusty African. But with your royal leave," he continued, striding toward the prostrate form, "this bundle of human flesh is as offensive to our sight as it is comfortless in its enforced coils."

And without awaiting permission from the king, he drew his poniard, and, bending low on one knee, cut with

its sharp blade the cords which held the runner captive, then, rising, applied to him such a vicious kick that the Moor fairly shot through the draperies out of the council-hall, to the great relief of every one present with the exception of the Duke of Lesina.

"Let not the glib tongue of this fiend and arch-traitor lead the king into his toils," gasped the old duke, almost beside himself with rage at beholding the composure of Altamura and the favourable impression produced on the king and council by his admittedly sane logic. "I repeat my accusation,—I accuse the duke of fostering friendship with the black bands for his own personal ends, I accuse him of playing under cover with the sworn enemies of your house. I am an outcast, nameless, homeless, but I stand here not only to denounce the perpetrator and promoter of all acts inimical to the house whose name I bear, but to urge two matters in the name of justice," he continued, darkening with suppressed passion. "I demand that the laws of God and man be put into execution against the woman called, to the eternal blush of our name, Francesca di Lesina,—once a nun, whom the papal tribunals have condemned as the paramour of an accursed villain; I demand the restoration of the wrongfully seized and tyrannically withheld estates, honours, and wealth of our house."

"Merciless knight! Art thou not satisfied with the blood which thou and thy followers have so long drained from every pore of this land? Must more blood, flowing in the veins of a most miserable woman, be shed to appease thy thirst?" exclaimed the king. Then, turning to Altamura, he continued: "We have listened to your defence, duke, and so well are we disposed toward you, recognizing the great services which you have rendered our house, that we pray you to forgive the gray hairs

of your accuser, to bury the old quarrels and strife! We would apply a general bandage to the wounds of the state, and Apulia bleeds fast from those of such valiant knights. Will you be the first to extend the hand of reconciliation, Duke of Altamura?"

"It were ill if we requited the royal confidence by declining so noble a request," the duke responded, with feigned humility and without raising his eyes, but his rhetoric suffered a sudden check.

"Little do I marvel at your willingness, most courteous assassin, poisoner, traitor, and abductor, to make the peace of your black soul with the house of Lesina!" the old duke roared, shaking like an aspen. "And if you will but seal it in person at our castle, so far from denying you refreshments, we shall serve you the headless trunk of your paramour, that you may kiss it after I have wiped the stain from the name of Lesina in her degenerate blood."

"I thank you, most courteous knight," the high constable replied, turning ghastly pale, "and by the little moan I make for the wanton, I shall prove how false are your lies and accusations! But by the faith of my body," the duke continued, his hand on his sword, "I will send you and your misbegotten bastard brood to hell ere you shall have her! Not for the love of her,—for when I tire of her she may end her days in the company of her like, but to show you how I despise you and your prating."

"Then guard her well! For if justice be denied, I will storm your lair and hang her on the highest tree to be found."

The old duke turned to the king.

"I ask no favours, King Manfred: I demand justice and the woman who has reviled the time-honoured name

of our house by coupling it with that of his like," — he paused while he cast a glance of unutterable loathing and hatred on his foe, such as a man might turn on some reptile whose venom rankled in his flesh, — "of him who once before deserted the king's cause at the direst pinch of our affairs."

"To the king, my sovereign, alone am I bound to account for my demeanour," growled the duke, "but I intend to depart at the earliest for Castel Gandolfo, to offer my personal excuses to my accuser."

A general murmur arose, while Manfred's eyes flashed fire.

"By the wrath of God! Has the many-headed hydra, which we thought crushed, again raised the serpent heads of sedition? Leave our presence, Duke of Lesina! Too long have we listened to your treason and rebellious speech."

"This as reply to my demand for our confiscated estates. Will the king deliver the woman to us?"

"Alas! What would then be our choice but to become a sainted monk, and mumble Misereres," said Altamura, with such mock solemnity that those who heard the speech laughed outright.

"As for the woman," Manfred replied, "it lies not within our domain to enter into the private quarrels of our vassals. Have you any just complaints, our courts are open to the highest and the lowest."

A laughter of unutterable scorn broke from the lips of Lesina.

"It lies not within the jurisdiction of your courts to determine the honour of our house. We have been faithful vassals of the crown in war and in peace, but since the king's Majesty holds in utter contempt and defiance all reason and justice, since he has banished all fit council

from the realm, we of the house of Lesina deny his suzerainty and no longer acknowledge him as our sovereign. I go to lodge this protestation with the protonotary of the realm!"

"And this is the recompense for our conciliatory policy, the several grants in our kingdom," said Manfred, turning to Galvano Lancia. "But we have studied the Roman law, and remember to have read that the ingratitude of the receiver gives the granter the right to reclaim his gift."

"If your Majesty had studied the canon law with equal profit, you would have found that worse crimes are threatened with worse penalties, but we will be silent till the heavens themselves begin to clatter the tidings."

Almost suffocated with the violence of his rage, Manfred gasped for breath, then, springing from his seat, he shouted "Guards! Guards!" with so loud a voice that the Saracens, stationed in the corridor, burst in with spears lowered, expecting no less than an attack on the king. But before Manfred could shape his furious intent into words, the brothers Lancia and Capece had with combined efforts succeeded in calming his wrath.

"You speak truth, my lord; it becomes not our Majesty to altercation with traitors and rebels, wherefore we will leave these to choke in their venom, giving the bastards till sunset to leave our dominions, when, if we find them out of their holes, rather than miss their destruction we will set the very stubble on fire."

"By San Gennaro, King Manfred," spoke the intrepid Lesina, "there is an abundance of bastards already in the kingdom without lugging in more! I go — and may the king never have cause to rue this hour."

"Remove him! Remove him!" Manfred gasped, whit-

ening with rage at the insult aimed at himself, "ere we do that which we may repent."

Without the customary homage Lesina strode erect through the ranks of the silent barons, but when he reached the portals he turned to give a parting look of defiance to the Duke of Altamura, who returned it to the full.

"A grim old lion," John of Alifé remarked with a sneer to the latter, after Lesina had disappeared. "He never loved you, as he should, bearing in mind that you are a connection."

The high constable bit his lip, with an irate side glance at the chancellor.

"He raves, as most men do at his stage of life. But I would rather spend an hour in the torture-chamber than undergo another ordeal like this."

After the council had, without further interruptions or reference to the events which had transpired at its sitting, closed its deliberations for the day, and after Manfred and the Apulians had departed, leaving the hall singly or in groups, the Duke of Altamura found himself face to face with San Severino.

"Are you a wizard?" said the latter to the duke, after they were alone. "We are straining every nerve to no purpose, and you seem to hold every thread in your hand."

"Not a wizard, but an Italian, tired of foreign bondage and resolved to break asunder the shackles that have fettered our freedom for centuries."

"The moment seems ill-chosen!"

An impatient gesture interrupted the speaker.

"Was there ever treaty that could not be broken? It is all the purpose in their making. Ah, San Severino,

you may yet reside like a lord on your confiscated estates ! ”

“ Our estates ! The very memory rankles in the blood ! But who will wear the lion’s skin after the game ? ”

“ The lion’s skin can but cover a lion ! But I must look to my runner. By the flames of purgatory, that old dotard had well-nigh deprived me of my pleasant coadjutor ! It is the first time he has thus been tracked ; his wits must have dried up in the Maremma. How do you like him ? I had his tongue torn out — he can be trusted ! Ay ! if the state knows not how to honour virtue, I do. Verily, San Severino, you will live to see great things accomplished by humble means.”

The Apulian kept back the reply which came to his lips, and moved uneasily toward the door.

“ I do marvel,” he then said, “ that your Lordship will have anything to do with such a vicious, pestilential, misshapen monstrosity, the very odour of which — ”

“ Egad, count,” interrupted the duke, “ the monstrosity is fit for its work and his work for the man, and, as the saints say, ‘ does not the end sanctify the means ? ’ Ah, you shudder, San Severino, even in this warm air, as if the paws of my gentle strangler encircled your neck. And in all truth, would he not prove a most grateful surprise to one’s foe ? What say you, count ? Imagine yourself starting up suddenly from uneasy, fitful slumbers, — distant convent bells toll the midnight hour, — you feel the unseen presence of something, seemingly not of this earth, — you rise on your pillows, — your eyes stare through the darkness, — now an errant moon-ray glides slanting into your chamber, and you see in the murky twilight, crouching near your bed, like the panther of the desert, even yon misshapen monstrosity, — you stare into the red glare of his eyes, — you behold his dilated nostrils, — the gleam

of his wolfish teeth, — suddenly a spring, — a yell, — a moan, — and all is over. How pale you are, San Severino, and yet it is a most pleasant death; only you cannot recite all your sins between acts. Pleasant dreams, count, and may our plans succeed ere the birds have flown for whom the spring is set.”

So little did San Severino relish the duke’s histrionic talent that he shot through the door of the council-hall as if the African were in very truth upon his heels, never heeding the duke’s parting salutation. The latter gazed upon his swiftly retreating form with a contemptuous smile.

“Thou deemest thyself a most cunning hound, San Severino, and yet thou quakest before the mere shadow of a midnight vision. Look to it that it remain one — look to it well!”

It had grown dark in the council-hall. The tapers in the candelabras shed a mournful glow over the high vaulted chambers, casting sombre shadows in the nooks and corners.

The duke turned to a window facing the terraces which sloped toward the bay, and, imitating a certain night-bird, uttered a shrill whistle, which at short intervals he repeated three times. Hardly had he finished the last call when a black mass, that seemed to fly through the air in its breathless speed, almost fell at his feet. There it lay crouching like a cowed wild beast before the whip of its master.

A fiendish gleam lit up the duke’s features as he received from the hands of the African a scroll, securely tied and sealed. After having closely scrutinized the seal and found the same intact, he placed the scroll in his silken doublet; then retracing his steps, he paused within

a few paces of the Moor, as if to gain a better view of the creature before him.

"Thou hast let that old bear track thee down, Zem," he said, in a voice whose mock caressing tones formed a strange contrast to the tenor of his speech, which, though rather guessed than understood, sent a shiver through the body of the kneeling African. "Thou, who canst outstrip the fleetest deer, hast fallen into the snares laid for thy master. 'Tis a pity thou hast not the gift of speech, for we might learn something above the mere surmise. Look up, Zem!" the duke continued, more fiercely. "We will give thee one more test. Thou wilt depart this very hour with the message we entrust to thee to Lucera, the Saracen city—thou hearest, to Lucera! Thou wilt hasten with all the speed of thy deformed carcass to reach her gates within one week. There thou wilt show this ring, which will admit thee into the city, and this letter, which will cause thee to be conducted into the presence of the one in command, John the Moor. To him thou wilt deliver this scroll, and to me thou wilt bring his response. And hark thee, my gentle Zem! If thou as much as falter in one step, if thou delayest as long as one moment on the journey after thou reachest Taranto, if thou passest not through the Apulian land swift as the shades of the damned fleeing from judgment, I will have thy naked body torn with hot irons and roast thee alive over a slow fire, and crows and vultures shall shriek exultant over thy writhing carcass!"

With these words, the understanding of which was attested by the crouching figure with something like a low moan, the duke stepped to the table. From there he took a sealed letter and a ring, both of which he delivered to the African, who received them lying almost

flat upon the ground while he kissed the sandals of the duke.

At a sign from the latter he arose.

"Remember thee well, Zem —"

With these words he pointed to the aperture through which the African had entered, and so quickly did the runner disappear that it seemed as if a shadow had passed through the room.

With a smile of grim satisfaction the duke's gaze followed the fleeting form of the African.

"It will require a swifter hunter than Lesina to track the game this time," he said, watching intently till the last trace of the runner had vanished in the blue moonlit night without. Then he broke with eager fingers the seal of the message. The parchment which he unrolled was written in the quaint, monastic style of the time; from it the duke began to read.

"We, Charles of France, by the grace of God, Count of Anjou, Forcalquier, Languedoc, and Provence, by the free will of the people of Rome Senator-elect, King of Sicily, Apulia, and Capua, King of Jerusalem, Knight of St. Louis, Knight of St. Denis, defender of the faith, to Ferrando, Duke of Altamura, — greeting."

The duke paused, while his gaze wandered from the parchment.

"King of Sicily, Apulia, and Capua," he soliloquized. "By San Ambrogio, Anjou holds our Italian honour cheap! Thinks he to gain these realms over our heads without one stroke of the sword? If he does, — by the mass, he shall have to beg harder for his head than he did in Egypt upon his return from the unconquered holy sepulchre! Are we indeed but to exchange one tyrant for another? Are the wizard's words to come true so soon? King of Sicily, Apulia, and Capua! Style thyself

thus for an hour and a day, defender of the faith, till the lava from the flaming volcano has consumed the Hohenstaufen empire,—then beware of our Apulian quicksands!”

The duke continued to read, commenting on the message as he proceeded.

“Promises vaguely disguised,—‘We shall respect the rights of our loyal barons’—a noble bait! Had we but forces of our own! The Apulians love the king,—the Moslems cannot be bought,—the Germans are so stubborn that nothing but the colic will move them. Could we but dislodge them from the bulwarks of their loyalty! They are postponing their departure upon advice,—whose advice? And Landulf of Trent, that gaunt, brawling swine, who has greater regard for a brimming tankard than for the father of Christendom and the Conclave combined—” The duke paused with a shudder; the words died on his lips.

Whence that icy blast which permeated the atmosphere like a breath from an open grave?

Altamura started to rise. The light of the tapers, flickering dimly, turned a spectral bluish hue, as according to popular belief they do when a departed spirit passes through the room. Just at that moment the convent bells from Santa Lucia and the remoter cloisters of San Giovanni degli Eremiti pealed the midnight hour, and their mingled chimes, vibrating through the breathless calm of night, seemed to intensify the stillness rather than to break it. Suddenly a faint bluish light appeared beside the duke, and in it rose an apparition, indefinable in outline, a dark spectral something that chilled the blood to the very heart and froze every limb. A pitiable groan came from Altamura’s lips as, almost mad with terror, he stared at the phantom, then he staggered as if a deadly

blow had been dealt him from an invisible arm; wildly his hands beat the air, and with a choked, inarticulate outcry he fell senseless, striking his head against the hard oaken sill.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GROTTOS OF PROSERPINA

THE sun had risen in the valley of Palermo, and the soft haze of the summer morning had floated away into nothingness, leaving every object fresh with dew and magnified in the limpid purity of the air. Golden shafts of light pierced the heavy foliage, which spread, a verdant canopy, over the terraces of La Khalesa, the cooling breezes of morning were laden with the aromatic vapours of orange and almond-trees, oleander and magnolias, laurel and anemones. In the limpid sky, as against a golden dome, were traced the spires and towers of Palermo; the minarets of the mosque of Abdurrrhaman were clearly defined against palm and cypress groves. Behind the broad promontory of Monte Pellegrino, arching out toward the sea, rose the distant slopes of the Bagaria, while full of life and colour the beautiful bay stretched toward the Liparian Islands, covered with hundreds of boats, whose many-coloured sails added a dream-like enchantment to the scene.

Such was the vision which met Ottorino's gaze as he stepped out to the balcony after the uneasy, fitful slumbers of the preceding night. He almost cursed the beauty of nature. The brilliant light seemed but a herald of long, sunny hours which to him would be filled with doubt and anguish. Into the days which had passed

since his arrival on Sicilian soil there had been compressed the essence of a lifetime, both in happiness and misery. His plans and resolutions were now so hopelessly confused that he almost despaired. How could he hope to meet Helena if she were averse to the tryst? His appeals, urgent and aflame with the passion that consumed him, had not even elicited a response.

As the day advanced, Ottorino resolved to acquaint Manfred with his adventure, and give him the meagre details of a mysterious crime which he had gleaned from the Moorish girl's demented fancy. The bonds of friendship, strengthened by mutual regard, confidence, and kindred temperaments between the envoy of Matteo Visconti and the Hohenstaufen, were riveted still closer during their brief but important interview.

Returning to Khalesa, Ottorino found himself accosted by a page in the gaudy livery of some Sicilian noble. The page, after furtively scanning the Lombard, as if to establish his identity beyond doubt, handed to him a scroll tied with blue silken cords, then, without vouchsafing a word or awaiting a reply, sped away.

For a moment the Visconti stood motionless, his heart throbbing so wildly that he thought he could hear its tempestuous beats through his steel corselet, then, cutting the cords, he stared at the contents of the scroll as if it were a message from another world.

At last, then, his fervent appeals had found her ear, — at last, then, a word from Helena! Was this the language of deceit? Was this the speech of a woman to whom love had ever been a stranger? Was it not rather the outcry of one who had been driven to the last extremes by the tyrannical surveillance of another? He pondered awhile, — then he started. What certainty was his that this message, couched in terms of terror

and endearment, emanated from Helena di Miraval? What certainty that it was even intended for himself, the most ill-favoured suitor for her hand? Ottorino was neither in a mood to temporize nor to stop to analyze his thoughts, and when, after a second glance at the scroll, he remembered the spot assigned for the tryst at dusk, the ardour in his breast was kindled to such a pitch that no consideration of danger could have restrained him.

An hour before the appointed time Ottorino's shadow walked darkly beside him toward Monte Pellegrino. His feelings by this time were wrought up to such a point that reason had completely resigned her sway. He framed and rejected plan after plan, speech after speech, until he appeared to himself like the floating fragment of a vessel, cast hither and thither by turbulent waves.

The sight of the ruins in which the Dominican dwelt rekindled some of Ottorino's wildest fancies. He paused with a degree of irresolution, but a sweet breath of roses, blown to his lips by a chance breeze, so forcibly recalled one of the most insidious charms of the Fata Morgana that he hastened onward, wondering at his own wavering. The path was almost deserted until he reached the palm groves near the church of St. Pelagio. These groves were crowded with devotees, and Ottorino felt a vague sense of apprehension creep into his heart as he heard the lugubrious chant of a death-mass stealing from within on the silent air of night.

Passing the gates, a narrow vale stretched before him, a sea of long, flowing grass, broken but by a few solitary Moorish tombs, and bounded by wavelike hillsides, still bathed in the last rays of the departing light of day. The only living objects visible were a few sheep or goats; the only sounds audible were distant warblings of shep-

herds' pipes, whose owners diverted themselves by night after the traditional manner of their Arcadian predecessors.

The sky was still tinged with glowing tints, and the solemn heads of one or two solitary pines had not quite abandoned the reflection. Attracted by the contrast between the purity and serenity of nature and his own turbulent passions, Ottorino stopped to watch the sunset. As he turned he found himself face to face with an old woman, who, after timidly glancing to the right and left, accosted him.

"Ah! It is thou, the Lombard knight! Well, God be praised, for the child was almost beside herself from fear and apprehensions! But thou art early, though they say lovers' feet are swift, and disappointment comes soon enough, — and I bring it," said the old dame, much agitated and seemingly out of breath.

Ottorino's resolutions vented themselves but in an echo, full of the meaning of the word.

"Disappointment!" he said, paling. "What mean you, mother? It is impossible! She promised by everything holy to come, — a few moments will suffice, — but I must see her."

"I tell thee it is impossible — impossible," replied the old crone, shaking her head in confirmation of her speech. "Thou wilt believe me when I tell thee that the duke, her kinsman, has got wind of her intentions and has dogged her every step this whole blessed day, so that discovery would be as sure to overtake you both as night follows day!"

Ottorino was instantly struck with the incongruity of this statement, but a second thought thrilled his blood like the sting of a scorpion. The old woman probably mistook the nature of his agitation, imputing it to the

terror which the presence of so formidable a rival as the one darkly hinted was likely to produce.

"Here is gold," the Visconti said, after a pause. "And now to thy business."

"Fie upon thee, son—gold! For what dost thou take me? Nay, if I must take it, it will be to buy two candles for the good of my soul," said the old dame, with indignation, but pocketing the coins. "Ah! Had she but dared to come, she would have been as glad to see thee as thy mother after thy return from battle,—ten times gladder! But thou knowest, knight, the duke is no fool's bladder, that hits and gives no headache."

"Enough of thine idle prattling! If this be all thou art instructed to say, begone and let me go my way."

And without further parley Ottorino started in the direction of the grottoes, which formed one of the principal retreats of the flowery wilderness, known as the vale of Proserpina. It was here that the daughter of Demeter was said to have spent her last days on the blooming earth, ere as Pluto's consort she bade it farewell in exchange for the abode she was to rule ever after.

The old woman watched the Lombard closely, as if to note the direction which he took, then she suddenly called to him to halt.

"What a temper! What a bad, bad temper in one so young," she muttered, shaking her head. "Listen! The duke is like to visit this spot ere night is over; he loves to puzzle mankind; thou hadst better not be seen here," the old hag whispered, while she glanced at the Visconti with a look such as only an Italian hag can give, her black eyes flaming like coals. Then she burst into an immoderate fit of laughter, which subsided only in as immoderate a fit of coughing.

"Avoid the windings of the gardens which lead to the grottoes," she concluded, shaking her skinny finger.

"I thank thee for thy warning," returned Ottorino, "and, knowing the peril that I run, I shall not delay to fall into it." Then he left her so abruptly that she stared a moment aghast ere she comprehended that he had disappeared.

The words of the old dame struck the conviction into Ottorino's soul that there was more behind them than she led him to believe. A bitterness such as he had never before known took possession of him, and his thoughts were as dark as the realms into which the mysterious grottoes were supposed to lead. The way was absolutely unknown to him, but he followed the winding path regardless of where it would carry him to. Below lay a wooded valley, into which he slowly began to descend, after passing through a gate in a hedge of aloës matted together with every species of odoriferous climbing plants.

An enervating perfume saluted him on every side, for the underbrush of the bank which he descended by an ingenious labyrinth of windings was formed of fragrant shrubs and the most richly coloured and scented productions of the profuse flora of Italy. The myrtle, laden with thoughts of love, glittered tearfully in the moonlight; lavender mingled its fine essence with the intoxicating perfume of the bay; roses innumerable filled the air with their heavenly breath. The wood itself consisted chiefly of orange, cedar, and wild fig-trees, all in full bloom, intermingled with a few stately oaks. From the depths of the valley came the musical murmur of the stream, mingled with the songs of innumerable nightingales, which seemed to have colonized so congenial a retreat. And if his ear did not mock him, the Visconti distinguished faint flute notes and other sylvan

music in the distance, which came and died on the evanescent breezes. Withal there was an air of wildness, as if nature had abandoned herself unmolested to this profusion of romantic loveliness. No trace of art was evident to break the spell which enchanted the senses. Even the statues of rural divinities, which gleamed here and there from the foliage, relics of a classic age, startled rather by a vague impression of existence and reality than as wonders of artificial creation.

Descending through this bower of Eden, Ottorino came to the banks of the Oreto. Here the verdure seemed fairly enamelled with flowers, and the moon by this time shone so brightly that their superb tints were softened but not lost in the shade; even the dark violets displayed their purple edges with golden lights.

A little higher a rivulet, pouring its silver flood into the Oreto, formed a cascade, over which the ancient statues of Flora and Pomona bent toward one another, entwining flowers and fruit into an oval arch. Beyond the cascade the meadow opened into a circular form, and immediately in front arose a lofty bank, in which there appeared the mossy entrance of a grotto, to which a winding path, just sufficiently wide for one man, ascended. Art seemed only to have imitated the affluent caprice of nature in the adornment of this charmed retreat. The tall rocks overhead preserved their native moss; the wild vine clambered with the wild rose and still wilder fig-tree; drops trickled through the interstices and streamed down the plants which hung from their fissures. Even the profusion of sweet-scented flowers seemed only to prove that nature herself had taken an exceeding delight in the place, and had decked it with most lavish magnificence for her own Buen Retiro from the glorious suns of her beloved Italy.

Ottorino paused at the entrance of the grotto, though the archways of honeysuckle, stirred by a soft breeze, shook the sugared dew from their seashell coloured bells into his face, as if to refresh and invite him in. Still he wavered. It was not fear; but he was struck with amazement at the silence and dreamlike solitude which seemed to reign in this supremely beautiful spot.

The entrance to the grotto before him was an irregular dome, composed of slender twigs, matted with vines, honeysuckles, and other twining plants, supported as on pillars of verdure by the trunks of the trees, and walled with moss and espaliers of flowers. While the grotto in reality possessed three distinct and individual approaches, each completely secluded and apart from the other, and known but to those familiar with the labyrinths of the vale of Proserpina, it seemingly had but the one which Ottorino had by chance discovered. A few moments he tarried at its entrance, undecided and unwilling to penetrate the Stygian darkness. He was about to retrace his steps, when at that very moment there appeared in the deepest recess of the cavity a soft glimmer, coming from what appeared to be an alabaster lamp, shaped like a suspended moon. Forgetting his resolve to leave the enchanted spot, Ottorino stared in the direction of the strange light, anxiously waiting to see what would follow.

A few moments elapsed, during which he heard not a sound, save the throbbing of his own heart. Breathlessly he waited, and, seeing and hearing nothing, was about to indulge himself with a full inhalation, when he fancied that he heard a soft and rapid footfall resounding faintly in the remote recesses. The steps seemed to hesitate for a brief space of time, then they came on, as if reassured by the silence, and a woman glided in. The grace and

lightness of her movements and the rounded beauty of her figure at once convinced Ottorino that he beheld the one whom he most feared and most wished to meet — Helena di Miraval. His heart gave one great and mighty bound, — she was here — she had not deceived him. But what was her purpose in the cavern? Was this the cause of the hag's seeming uneasiness — of her warning to him to avoid the park? Ottorino heard himself laughing aloud, and the youthful nymph who had just entered the cave started at the strange sound. Despite the anguish which consumed his heart, the Visconti could not avert his gaze from the lovely apparition. She had changed the costume in which he had first met her to one purely Grecian. The loose folds of some shimmering and exquisitely fine silken tissue reflected the delicate tints of the sky colours in a seashell, and floated around her exquisite form, confined by a coral clasp over her beautiful shoulders. Her arms and feet were bare, save that the latter were sandalled with silver. Ottorino remarked her beautiful chestnut hair, tied in a Grecian knot and wreathed through with crimson water-flowers, but to his further surprise and chagrin he noted that she wore a mask.

Undecided whether to enter the cave or to first ascertain her purpose, the Lombard remained where he was. The masked lady, after satisfying herself apparently by a glance around the grotto that no one but her fair self was in it, sat down on a ledge of rock and, timidly listening, bent her head from one side to the other. Ottorino's heart beat so wildly that he almost felt impelled to rush into the cave, though it was well for him that he checked his impetuous ardour. Glancing around, he perceived that the rocks of the cavern were broken by little caves and narrow terraces, blooming with flowers or

shadowed with drooping foliage. These were reached by playful zigzags, irregularly cut, as if to mock the efforts of the climber. And the diversion of mounting them seemed seldom used, for the mosses appeared untrodden, and in many places briar roses and jasmine had so twisted over that even a nymph would have had some difficulty in gaining a foothold. Without giving himself time for deliberation, Ottorino climbed one of the higher ledges, but his progress was quickly barred by a cave of glittering spar, which was thrown into shadow by a profusion of laurels in their full purple bloom. Directly beneath him yawned a stagnant pool, rendering futile every further effort at approach.

He was just sufficiently far removed from the fair visitor of the grotto to be able to discern her movements, while the distance made it impossible for him to hear anything she might say to the one she doubtlessly expected, even if the conversation should be carried on in tones above those in which discourses of this character are usually held. There was nothing left for Ottorino but to crouch down in a bed of iris and basil, whose sweetness vainly wooed his notice and into which he thrust his limbs. He peered forth from this hiding-place like some wild animal from its haunt, and with feelings little less ferocious; for that he was not the expected one the place and the gestures of the nymph had convinced him. Even at this distance Ottorino had established the identity between the masked occupant of the grotto and the fairy Morgana, and it was only with the exertion of all the calmness at his command that he constrained himself to the position of a silent witness.

The nymph's attitude now, while she sat listening, was one of grace and beauty. She stirred uneasily, then listened again, and Ottorino thought in his excited fancy

that he could even distinguish the beatings of her heart through her aerial robes. A bird chirruped and she started up; silence followed, and with an expression of scorn and hauteur she sank back into her waiting attitude.

Another pause, and, as if overcome by impatience, the nymph moved rapidly toward the background of the grotto, but to the Visconti's deep satisfaction she returned disappointed. Languidly she sank upon the verdant couch, as if quite vanquished by the weariness of her wait. She rested for a little, crossing her beautiful arms over her head, but the disquietude returned; she kissed the misnamed heartsease and mignonette of her fragrant pillow with vague rapture, started up, plucked some flowers, covered them with kisses, and pressed them with devouring tenderness to her lips and bosom, then threw them disdainfully away. Suddenly she sprang from the couch; footsteps were remotely audible, and in an instant she had taken her seat on the mossy bank, apparently as calm and passionless as a statue of the ancient goddess of the waves.

There was something of maddened frenzy in the conflict of emotions with which Ottorino watched these seemingly irrefragable signs of kindled passion, these preparations for the reception of a monstrous rival. And he who approached came as stealthily as a leopard; yet his footfall was sufficiently audible to the lady; she did not, however, look in the direction whence it proceeded, but began to murmur a little melody.

The form of a cavalier, splendidly garbed and wearing a mask, now appeared in the far-off background, and paused for an instant as if to survey the interior. It was a moment of almost mortal agony for Ottorino, who drew himself up, clutching his poniard, resolved to rush forth despite pool and rocks and obstacles, and interrupt the

tête-à-tête. But his purpose suffered a sudden check because of an exclamation of joy from the woman. The Lombard's heart stood still as he beheld the intruder holding both her hands in his own, while kneeling at her feet he murmured unintelligible words in most loverlike and dulcet accents.

But who was the favoured one now speaking in such rapt tones, and who received such flattering attention from the nymph of the grotto? Slowly his arm stole around her; she bent low to him, abandoning herself to his embrace; now he touched her mask, still she offered no resistance. Breathlessly Ottorino bent forward to gain a glimpse of her unmasked face, when without warning, as if by a magic device, every ray of light vanished and the grotto and its mysterious inmates were wrapped in Stygian darkness.

The Lombard adopted the only course now open to him, speeding dexterously from his concealment and seeking with all possible haste the open air. A tremor had seized him, and he quaked with abject fear, as if he had encountered a denizen of the spectre world. His spirit was broken; the sight which had met his gaze had proven too much. He found himself face to face with a problem which it was not for him to solve; a faithlessness and coquetry unparalleled in the annals of mankind. Artfully she had avoided him since that fateful night at Favara, and now she had filled up the measure by bidding him hither to witness the triumph of a rival. The dream of love was over, and the end — what would it be?

CHAPTER V.

THE TRYST

ALMOST at the hour when Ottorino had entered the vale of Proserpina from its western approach, a woman, muffled and masked, followed by a man who, wrapped in a dark mantle, silently tracked her footsteps on the soft, velvety greensward, was swiftly approaching the grotto from the opposite direction.

After arriving at the vine-covered entrance, the woman, glancing fearfully first in one direction, then another, sank exhausted upon a projecting ledge of rock. She had not been there long enough even to indicate the purpose of her presence before her masked follower, appearing suddenly and stealthily from behind the rose thicket, knelt at her feet and poured forth a torrent of passionate confessions. She shrank back with a cry of terror and would have fled if his presence had not obstructed the only path leading from the vale.

"'Tis false — 'tis false, cavalier. I await no one, or but my mistress, the lady of Miraval, who will be here in an instant," exclaimed the woman, in a terrified tone. "Begone — begone! We are not so lonely as you think, and I would not that any one find you here with me for all I own or hope in earth or heaven."

"Hush, hush, my fairest unknown! What know you of me, that you thus deprecate my society? Am I not

as acceptable as the one whom I chanced to overhear as he scorned the gentle invitation you did send him, — scorned it with loathing and abhorrence? I bethought myself to come in his stead, for the bold in love are favoured by Venus for the sake of her valiant lover, the god of war," returned the masked cavalier, in light and mocking tones.

"Scorn — loathing — abhorrence!" exclaimed the woman, in half-stifled accents. "It is impossible, — and yet, — why, then, — why, then, I am glad, — no, I meant not that, not that, — I desired but to learn the cause of the knight's strange actions why — why he has even refused a reply to my mistress's most urgent appeal, that she may — take revenge and —"

The cavalier laughed.

"Your mistress will do like great kings detected in base policies, — she will deny her envoy," he then replied, in a strange tone. "And I tell you if you but dare again to soil her dignity even with an imputed share in your offence, I will trumpet your shame to all Christendom, and tell to all the world that you have not blushed to lure an unwilling stranger to your arms! Would not such a tale renown you farther than many another dark supposal now floating on the wings of night? Ah! Do not shudder nor contemplate aught frantical, fairest of all Eve's daughters! I mean not to pry behind your mask. But you shall not waste your beauty and this loving hour because spurned by one, as long as the fire of passion flows in the veins of another."

"You shall not need to pry behind my mask — behold, here is my face," the woman interrupted the speaker, while with a laugh of unutterable scorn and fury she tore the cover from her face, revealing Helena di Miraval, pale as death, her eyes flaming, her features alight with

passions, the more terrible from the contrast of their fierceness with her beauty.

"Ferrando—you know me now! Depart, if you would not have me summon my guards, as at the least utterance I can," she exclaimed, as the Duke of Altamura, feigning great surprise, started up at her speech. "Go! I defy you! Go with your tale to whomsoever you will, for to disprove it one word of these lips would suffice."

A laugh of irony broke from the duke's lips.

"So our fair kinswoman, who holds her head so proud and high, is really and veritably here on a rendezvous with the Lombard, who in language plainer than words has shown his aversion, his disdain, his scorn, whose self-appointed task it is to track our steps, to haunt our sleep —"

"And what if it be so? What right have you to dispute my pleasure?" interrupted Helena, passionately. "Who are you that you presume to dog my steps, to compel my choice? Are you father—husband—brother—or even—ah! Monster that you are! Oh, that these eyes may behold the day when your neck will feel the edge of the axe, which it has deserved so long!"

"I was mad once! Delirious with the fever of my toils to raise the name of Altamura to the proudest title in Italy, I raved—and it is Helena who reproaches me with my sufferings," said the duke, in a tone compounded of anger, fear, and feigned contrition.

The lady of Miraval glanced at him one brief moment as if her feelings wavered, but there was something in his face which roused her temper to its extremest limits.

"Begone—for the last time—begone!" she said, while her dilated nostrils and flaming eyes told him that

he had reached that extreme beyond which not even the Duke of Altamura dared to go, "or, by the everlasting judgment, I shall cry out to the guards."

"To the guards? To the guards?" replied the duke, with a livid smile, of which only himself and the evil fiend seemed capable. "Are you not more afraid that some other may hear it? Remember Enrico's doom and do not you bid me tremble, but tremble yourself for your minion!"

"Ah! Miscreant and fiend! What if I told the king? But of what shall I accuse you? The devils themselves know no name for your crimes."

"Accuse me to him, fairest of women, accuse, if you think that your charms can wield the thunder of majesty according to your liking," the duke replied, with a heinous smile. "Let him cast another into the gory grave of him who died so suddenly in the — who knows where? Do you, Helena cara? Or of him who was cured of his suspicions under his own paternal roof — not ours."

"I will not call you any monster, — I know of none I could compare you with," said Helena, with forced calmness, "but hearken to me at least in this matter!"

She paused a moment as if summoning a supreme resolution, then she continued:

"Do you hear me, Ferrando? I dared not tell it to my own heart, no, nor the heavens themselves, — I dared not believe it, yet I thought that of these horrors you were not so ignorant as the merciless steel which wrought them. But hearken to me! If but one hair on the Visconti's head be harmed, rest you assured that I will live but to avenge it, and that I shall be at no loss to tell what hand has struck the blow, though it be in the murkiest midnight that ever covered your hideous enterprises."

"I know your vengeance, fair Helena,—I know it well! But I shall not perish so dovelike as my predecessor. I am not a dumb fish to die without a shriek," replied the duke, fiercely, but with a mixture of sarcastic levity. "Ere I make my graceful retreat from the scene, I will confess not only mine own offences, but all that rumour imputes to your Grace. Of a surety, posterity will deem me a most likely witness, and humanity in general cannot doubt when they hear that death stood by, the scrivener of my harangue! You know not what I am, but this I will do if your woman's temper drive me to it."

"They will call you in death what you have been in life—a monster," replied Helena, in a wavering tone, as if her own mind were reeling under the too heavy blow and burden of anguish; then she continued:

"Nay! Perhaps with the springs of your direful existence would be exhausted that of mine ignominy; and he who first gave forth the sound might perish with its last echo on his lips. They cannot believe it—they cannot believe it!"

"Cannot? Cannot? Pray, and how did your noble cavalier look when he became first aware of our connection?" said the merciless duke.

"He looked as I would have him look, believing your measureless lies. For yes—yes, they are yours! Never till that hour when you did reveal yourself to be the fiend had calumny herself breathed evil word of me," said Helena, distractedly. But, struck with a dark change in the duke's countenance, she continued, almost imploringly: "But no, no! Perchance I am harsh now, and it is my evil fate alone. Ah! Let me not drag more victims into its wheels. What shall I do then? The only pure light, beaming peace on the troubled tempest of

my soul would come from a convent, — seclusion from the world, — and yet would even that save me from calumny? ”

“ There is but one salvation for you, Helena cara, — but one, and you know also that it lies not within the dark walls of a convent,” the duke said, meaningly.

A deadly pallor overspread her face, while her eyes shot fire.

“ You have my irrevocable reply for once and for aye, and now, Ferrando, I tell you for the last time, leave me ! ”

There was something in her tone which told the duke he had reached the limit, but he did not intend to retreat without leaving a memento of his presence.

“ I have your answer, you say, — for good and aye? And deem you, knowing Ferrando of Altamura, that he will cast away for a woman’s whim the chances of greatness, and become the humble servitor of my lord of the Viper? Not by all the furies of hell! You will do my bidding, if I have to summon every bravo in Apulia to drag you to your bridal-chamber, and if you still further persist in thwarting my plans, the head of Medusa shall appear as that of a Vestal compared to the halo I shall weave around your brow! This is our last word, Helena di Miraval, — our last ! ”

The lady of Miraval had risen to her feet, and her fingers convulsively clutched the hilt of a small dagger which she carried concealed under her gown. The duke watched her closely, retreating a step or two.

“ I will leave you to yourself now, fairest Helena, — to yourself truly, for he, whom you so eagerly await, has even now some other sheep in mind: thus do I cheat you out of the last comfort, that he has ever loved you ! ”

“ That he has ever loved me? ” she laughed, shrilly.

"What knows a ghou! like Ferrando of Altamura of the meaning of love?"

The duke's face turned livid.

"Little at best, but enough to know when other people's loves conflict with my plans. I had your tall and melancholy Lombard too well watched not to know that a certain fairy at the feast, in the garb of Fata Morgana, whom doubtlessly you did also behold, and of whose acquaintance I too can boast, has invited him to sup with her to-night in this very grotto, at the entrance of which we are now holding discourse!"

"And if this be true, — why — what is it to me? But no, no! It is one of your monstrous lies, born in the deepest pool of your black crimes. It cannot be — it cannot be!"

"Cannot?" repeated the duke, with a derisive sneer. "Cannot? Why then has your sentimental Lombard disdained even to vouchsafe a courteous reply to your entreaties? For I know this was not your first."

"Perhaps because he disdains to mingle the unstained honours of his ancestry with the bastard blood of Altamura," she exclaimed, rejoicing to give her retort the desired sting, though she herself shared the venom.

"For which ere many moons I will cut his throat and make him prey of all the carrion flies that ever thronged on dunghill," said the duke, with exceeding fierceness. "But you prate and your knight has sent you on a fool's errand. He will not come, even though you warble as sweetly as a nightingale luring its mate."

Altamura suddenly paused, listening to a sound as of remote footsteps, which for a time seemed to approach from the cavern, then receded in an opposite direction.

"You are still doubtful?" the duke continued, mockingly. "Let me for once and all dispel your vagaries .

and visions. Come!" He spoke almost fiercely, while he beckoned to her, to follow him.

The duke's determined manner, and the apparent plausibility of disappointment for the time even subdued Helena's haughty spirit; she moved not, but her doubting, questioning gaze told him that his words had not lost their meaning upon her.

"Follow me, — and if I do not furnish you all the proof and more of your lover's infidelity, then may you call the Duke of Altamura a churl! But one condition I impose, — that when, with your own eyes, you have convinced yourself of your folly, then will you look favourably upon my request?"

"Where will you lead me to?" faltered Helena di Miraval, while her hands clasped her throat as if she were choking.

"You shall not have far to go," the duke responded, pointing to the grotto. "The cupids are even now spreading their wings over the couch, from which your gallant lover and the fairy Morgana have chased the vestal nymphs!"

With these words the duke, hastening in advance of the lady, whom he knew to be following, approached the dark entrance to the grotto, the centre of which, illuminated as it was, presented to their sight the same strange spectacle Ottorino was even now beholding from his hiding-place in the other channel of the cavern. Altamura spoke not, but, drawing Helena to his side, pointed with a triumphant smile to the couple, his countenance alternately depicting ire and derision. Helena's hand had gone to her heart; she thought she could hear its wild throbbing in the dead stillness of the spot; her face was pale as death and her teeth set. Slowly she bent forward, shadowing her eyes with her hand; slowly she

penetrated into the darkness of the cavern, and so imperceptibly she moved that the duke hardly noticed that she was gliding away from him, so busily did he feast his gaze upon her matchless form. Slowly, almost unconsciously, he followed, until a ledge of rock, rising perpendicularly from a pool in the murky deep, barred further advance. The duke saw not the storm of passions which swept over his kinswoman's face, as, creeping closer and closer, she saw the last semblance to Ottorino vanish in the kneeling form of the man; but with the disappearance of its faintest trace a fear, horrible beyond conception, struck her soul. She heard the stealthy tread of the duke behind her, and, appearing so completely absorbed in the strange spectacle as to be utterly oblivious to all else, Helena strained every nerve in the frantic effort of discovering a means of escape. What mattered the personality of the woman! The cavalier was not the Visconti, and in the midst of her quaking fears she begged Ottorino's forgiveness in her heart.

Suddenly the mask fell from the face of the nymph, and, choosing this moment, Helena uttered an outcry which reëchoed through the caverns of the grotto, like the shrill laughter of a thousand demons, then, turning upon the duke with equal suddenness, she pushed him aside with such headlong violence that, taken unawares, he stumbled and fell. Helena rushed from the grotto, and at almost the same moment its radiance was changed to Stygian darkness. With a wild oath the duke struggled to his feet and groped his way through the gloom of the cavern. Moving step by step, he finally succeeded in reaching its half-concealed entrance, where he stood panting, cursing heaven and earth and all generations of men, the sea, the stars, and the saints, the whole fair sex collectively, and his fair kinswoman in particular.

CHAPTER VI.

LEILA

THE moon shone brightly in the dark, clear azure of the heavens, rendering distinct even the remotest objects, but Ottorino was filled with thoughts as dark as the ruins which bordered his path. As he came from the vale of Proserpine he was startled to see a solitary horseman wrapped in a long Spanish mantle. The cloak reached to his stirrups, and a broad-brimmed hat covered his head, shading eyes and face almost beyond recognition. The horseman seemed absorbed in some object across the bay, and so immobile was the attitude of rider and beast that one might have mistaken them for an equestrian statue. Without paying further heed to the strange apparition, the Lombard, guided by the beacon light on the Campanile, slowly made his way toward the city. His feelings were strung to a tension which deprived his mind of its last remnants of peace and tranquillity, and his resolve to break the fatal spell with one determined stroke wavered almost in its inception.

The streets of Palermo were still enlivened by a merry throng, determined to prolong the pageant of the waning night till the gray dawn of the rising day. The moonlight cast its pale rays over the flat roofs of the white Oriental dwellings, and shone on the cupolas and minarets

whose slender spires seemed to touch the very stars in the illusion of the summer night.

It was more especially the rabble of the city, who had chosen the late hours for their sports and pastimes. Ottorino passed unmolested through the dense crowds, and continued upon his way until he found himself opposite the Moorish palace of La Kufa. A large crowd had gathered here, surrounding a woman seated astride an ass. Her face was turned toward the tail and her feet were tied together. Two sbirri led the strangely burdened beast. Some hallucination doubtlessly possessed the woman, for although the rabble kept up a continual sullen roar of derision, her features were elate with joy and triumph, as if she were the chief personage of this fine procession.

Ottorino made his way through all the throng to the sbirri, and, upon beholding and recognizing the unfortunate creature, inquired what she had done to be thus ill-treated

"It is a Moorish harlot, signor, who lures good Christian people into her nets," replied one of the axemen.

"We are leading her to the prefecture for punishment," said the second.

"Cut her to pieces, the infidel witch, who brings the plague among us," yelled a woman.

Two stout ruffians, seemingly retainers of some great house, drew their daggers, shouting, "Death! Death!" and such a gibbering tumult arose that for some moments it was barely possible to distinguish a word that was said.

"Peace! Peace!" thundered Ottorino, stepping in front of the sbirri, and at this unexpected sight the uproar ceased.

"Valiant sbirri, mark you not that the poor girl is

mad, — bereft of reason?" said the Visconti, addressing her captors. "Leave her to my care and I will see her restored to her home without offence to any good Christian."

A universal shout of laughter rose in the air, indicating what the populace deemed of this proposal. The Moorish girl turned at the sound of Ottorino's voice and seemed to recognize her would-be deliverer, for she clapped her hands in delight.

"'Tis he, 'tis he!" she exclaimed, rejoicingly. "I have kept my word, you see! Lead me to him! Where is Enrico? For were I ten times a queen I would but be his servant and loving slave!"

Whether the ass, like Balaam's, was gifted with human understanding, and upon hearing these words felt justly elate, or whether it was simply the impulse of the beast, its voice rose in the air and spoke to the multitudes, and it was some time ere the sbirri with their clubs could silence its oratorical efforts.

"Shame, shame! so knightly a man to take the part of such a one," remarked the woman who had spoken. "But her philtres and love-draughts have bewitched him."

"Death to the witch!" again resounded on all sides.

"Patience, good people, patience," urged the knight, unsheathing his sword. "Whoever approaches within the length of this weapon shall taste of its edge! I tell you again, this young girl is mad, bereft of that reason which you bear so proudly and which almost distinguishes you from this gray, braying brute! But to content you, I will obtain her dismissal from some competent authority."

The awe which the power and tyranny of the nobles and military had infused in the minds of the common people befriended Ottorino on this occasion. Murmurs

indeed arose, and indistinct expressions of anger and disappointment, but no one offered any serious interference. The Visconti cut the thongs which fastened the poor girl's feet, made her turn to a more decent and feminine attitude, and took the ass by the halter, desiring the sbirri to keep on each side. The intention of the Lombard was not, however, to take the prisoner to the prefecture, but before a higher tribunal. Leila, however, seemed likely to baffle his intent. Knowing nothing of her deliverer's plan for discovering the assassin of her lover, she believed that she was being escorted in triumph to her Enrico's palace. Her satisfaction was so complete that it seemed a cruelty to attempt to break the illusion on which it was founded. Every object in turn attracted her delighted notion; she petted the ass and kissed her hands incessantly at the mob, in acknowledgment of their civility in accompanying her, but which they took to be a mockery of their baffled fury.

The whispers in which Ottorino endeavoured to recall her wandering mind heightened the suspicions and indignation of the populace to the highest degree. But his efforts to dispel the hallucinations which possessed her were in vain; every stately building which they approached she concluded to be the palace of her unknown lover, and she stared with amazement when they passed without beholding him. The glittering confusion surrounding her was a festive pomp prepared for her reception, and the splendid groups appearing and disappearing at intervals convinced her that they were at length approaching her lover's presence.

"How may that be, Leila?" urged the Visconti, labouring to combat her visions. "Have you not told me your lover is dead, — slain by assassins?"

"It was a dream — it was a dream! I often have

fearful dreams, for I knew the witches would slay him if they ever saw his shadow," she replied, impatiently. "But we shall easily know him, — there was none other like him, — none other."

Reduced to despair as he realized that no appeal to the realities of the scene could restore his demented charge to sanity, the Visconti was scarcely sorry to observe that they were fast approaching the terrace, to which the court was wont to retire after sunset. It was evident that they were descried from it, for an officer received some orders and rode toward them, shouting in harsh and imperative tones:

"Halt! Halt!"

The Lombard immediately obeyed, but the populace raised a tempest of cries, explanations, and demands for vengeance which drowned every distinct sound.

"What in the name of the foul fiend is this, scum," growled the horseman, still advancing, "that you break into the king's siesta with your rude clamour? What have we here, speak!"

The commander's visor was raised, and Ottorino perceived that his sallow complexion grew nearly bloodless as he looked at the young Moorish girl. But before the Lombard could make any reply, Leila uttered a joyful cry of recognition, and exclaimed:

"Take me to him! Take me to him! He is near now, for here is the stranger that brought me tidings from Enrico."

"What is this?" stammered the rider, staring around in mingled terror and amazement.

A hundred voices began to reply, but the Visconti's quickly overpowered even this numerous rivalry.

"This girl is mad, señor," he said, laying stress on the Spanish appellative, "yet not so mad but that it is to

be discerned that she has suffered a grievous wrong, either from her own people or some monstrous villain, and I have promised to lead her before the king himself, to demand justice."

"I am not mad! Did you not come, good Christian, to lead me to my lord?" said Leila, angrily, and looking with the eagerness of hope at the grim visage of Don Crivello, the Catalan.

"How came this woman here?" the latter exclaimed, after a brief pause.

"She stole forth to view the pageant, unless it was to meet her paramour, this valiant knight," cried a voice in the crowd.

Crivello's brow contracted as he turned to one of the *shirri* and demanded an account of the matter.

"Truly, my lord, so it seems,—and she appears to know this knight, for he rushed against all odds to her rescue."

Ottorino noted the deadly glare which flashed upon him from the Spaniard's eyes, but he remained calm and determined.

"It is death for any woman of this wench's trade to leave her lair after dark," the Catalan growled between his set teeth. "Go your way in peace, cavalier, and leave the harlot to the punishment that befits her offence! Stand off, ho! and whip her back from whence she came, but grant her fair way, that she may make the best of her noble courser's speed."

Universal applause greeted this proposition. Leila stared at the Catalan in vacant surprise and bewilderment. Ottorino, however, was determined to baffle the ruffian's intent, even if he had to stand alone against the whole rabble.

"This shall not be, señor," he interposed, a firm reso-

lution ringing in his voice, "at least, not until the king has heard her complaint. Some foul play has been wrought against her, — her lover slain in her arms, — she shall have justice."

"It is false!" replied Crivello, with difficulty bridling his wrath. "It chances that I know something of the ways of her kind! She thrusts her poisonous presence on honest Christians, — but since she is your paramour, signor, the only way to show your kindness now is to drive her back to whence she came, for until she reaches her dive I give lawful leave to every man to wreak his scorn upon her."

"Stand back, cur!" thundered Ottorino, raising his sword, "and bar not the way, for I will make it through an army rather than suffer your bloodthirsty malice to prevail."

"What malice have I against the wench?" returned the Catalan, his complexion resuming its leaden tints beneath the Lombard's penetrating gaze. "Woman — hast thou ever seen me before, or I thee, that I should bear thee malice?"

The Castellan of the Torre del Diavolo had certainly not noticed the strange expression on the Moorish girl's countenance, but when he turned and looked at her with his fierce, protruding eyes, she uttered a shriek which rang over the heads of the thousands, and with a hiss, as if to frighten away some direful apparition, she shouted "Murderer!" till the very skies seemed to echo with the crimson word.

"Upon her! Hack her to pieces! It is the law, and I will see it justified. Harm not the knight, but death to the harlot!" roared Crivello, spurring his horse toward her, but, coming between the Catalan and his intended

victim, Ottorino waved his long sword and soon cleared a circle to some distance.

"Approach at your peril!" he cried to Crivello, who involuntarily receded before the wrath he had engendered. The mob, recovering from their momentary stupor, and encouraging each other with loud shouts of fury, drew their daggers and were certainly meditating an onset. But just then a Saracen officer with half a dozen men appeared upon the scene, with the order to command peace and to conduct the offenders before the king.

"'Tis where we were bound, when yonder insolent impeded our advance," replied the Visconti, pointing to Crivello, who drew back at the impeachment, fearful of offering further opposition.

Lifting Leila from the ass and half-carrying her, Ottorino made his way to the terrace through the now unresisting crowds.

"Remember all your story now, your Enrico's murder, and demand justice at the feet of the kindest of rulers, before whom I will bring you," he exhorted the trembling girl, as they mounted the marble stairs; and Leila, whose recollections were now rekindled, cried "Murder! Murder!" and "Justice! Justice!" with frenzied eagerness at every step of their advance. The attention of the court was staggered by the strange spectacle of a knight of the empire half-leading, half-carrying a Moorish girl into the presence of the king. Manfred was seated in the centre of a glittering half-moon; the court had been diverted by the glowing and fantastic tales of an Arab story-teller, after the conclusion of a "Mask of the Gods," in which each participant had represented a deity of antiquity. At the smiling suggestion of the queen the masks were resumed at the approach of this singular

pageant. This circumstance was favourable to Ottorino's intent, as he feared that too sudden a recognition of the murderer might prevent the hearing of the tale, and Leila would seem only to rave. On the other hand, however, it raised an obstacle to his purpose, as he would not be able to determine the presence of the suspected, but a sudden idea occurred to him as he approached the royal dais. No one noticed the lightning exchange of glances between Manfred and Ottorino, fraught with a meaning known but to themselves, when Leila prostrated herself with Oriental homage.

"What part of the pageant is this, and who is the author of this surprise?" the king asked of the Lombard.

"The king's Majesty is to know that I have rescued this poor mad creature from the hands of certain ruffians, and I have brought her here to demand justice for a much more horrible deed," said Ottorino, bowing low, though even his stout heart quaked, as, glancing from the king to the masked cavalier by his side, he noted the glance which the latter turned on his suppliant, a glance which at once convinced the knight of the presence desired.

"What deed? Of what speak you? This is neither time nor place; the king's justices are men of approved integrity!" the masked cavalier spoke up, and at the sound of his voice Leila's whole frame trembled, while, clasping her hands to her forehead, she glared fixedly at the speaker.

"Formal justice is too slow and — uncertain. Three years have passed since the deed for which we demand redress was perpetrated," replied the Visconti.

"Three years!" Manfred exclaimed. "We will hear and adjudge the matter on the spot. It shall not be said that the ears of the son of Frederick were ever closed

to the cries of his subjects. Speak on, girl — we hear thee!”

“This much, then, I have gathered, King Manfred,” Ottorino replied in her stead. “This hapless girl had a Christian lover whose quality and name are unknown to her, but who called himself Enrico, and from her confused report he must have been of very high birth.”

“Enrico, — we have heard the rumour, but go on — go on!” Manfred exclaimed, hurriedly.

“The story, then, has reached the ears of the king’s Majesty?” Ottorino replied, with meaning.

“Among many others, at which, since our most dear and hapless brother met his mysterious doom, we have clutched in the vain hope of obtaining some clue to the guilty.”

“But this whole story has no other foundation than the ravings of a mad girl, whose relatives declare that she has never left her musky chambers during all her life,” the masked cavalier interposed in his apparent effort to stop the narrative.

“Is the masked signor so well informed?” Ottorino turned to the speaker. “Or are we to infer that this is not the first time he has met these accusing eyes?”

Then, noting the effect of his speech, he continued, addressing the king:

“This mad girl is now at your feet, King Manfred, and I implore you to listen. Her speech will be somewhat disordered, as that of one whose mind is shattered by a blow, yet not so wholly unpieced but that skilled eyes may join the threads of the web.”

“We will hear her,” Manfred replied, in troubled yet eager tones. “Arise, poor girl, and speak openly and without fear! When and how perished your lover, — your Enrico? By whose hand did he fall?”

Leila had continued kneeling during the entire dialogue, which she scarcely heard, so intently wrapped was she in scrutinizing the masked cavalier, in examining his person and habiliments. And so absorbed was she in this scrutiny that she started when her protector gently touched her to recall her attention.

"Now, Leila, speak! Who was it who slew your Enrico? Speak! Do you remember?"

"Where is he? Oh! He is gone!" she said, glancing timidly around the whole brilliant circle of the court and at the crowds, which had surged to the foot of the terrace, among which Crivello had disappeared.

"I never liked his black bead eyes, and so I told Enrico, but he loved me so, — and he would stay! And so the moon was shining, — and he was fast asleep, — and first they tapped at the door, — and I would not believe it, — I thought it was the wind. But they came, — they came, — I saw the moonshine on his face, — and I kissed his lips," and, heaving a deep sigh, the mad girl relapsed into silence.

"Now, Leila — Leila — remember! Repeat the tale you have told me! Remember how they tore him from your arms, remember your cries, their cruel stabs, his writhing form, his long hair all drenched in blood, and how they dragged his body away!" urged Ottorino.

With a shriek so wild and despairing that it resounded through the remotest recesses of the gardens, Leila embraced Manfred's knees and poured forth the dreadful revelation with such passionate vehemence that, wild and broken as it was, the scene became almost visual in the painting of her frenzied imagination.

"And the murderers were masked?" the king questioned the girl.

"The king's Majesty is listening to a mad woman,"

the masked cavalier interposed, in a perfectly composed voice. "We are infinitely beholden to the noble Lombard for the unselfish interest he has shown in the poor wench, but" — here he turned to the girl — "art thou sure thy lover did not leave thee when he had grown satiated with thy charms?"

"Where is he? Where is he? Let me but see him," exclaimed the girl, frantically. "He cannot be so cruel, — let me but see him!"

"The king's Majesty hears! Why should we spoil our diversions by further listening to this mad revelry? Who knows, — there may be deeper instruction in this!"

And the speaker glanced malignantly at the Visconti.

"Leila, — were all the murderers of thine Enrico masked? Did not the mask fall from the visage of the chief one in the struggle? For so she told me, King Manfred," said Ottorino, looking full at the masked cavalier, who seemed strangely moved.

"Is this true, Leila? Didst thou behold the worse than devilish visage of one of the murderers?" exclaimed Manfred, with a sudden wildness that contrasted strangely with his usual calm demeanour.

"One, — yes, — the scarlet one!" said Leila, with truly insane rapidity, as if she divined that they were on the verge of a dire discovery.

"Let the king's Majesty command all present to unmask, and we shall see if she recognizes any one in this assembly," the Visconti urged, in stern but respectful tones.

"The farce grows somewhat dangerous," interposed the masked cavalier, hurriedly. "The wench's madness is as like to hit one as it is another, and thus darken some innocent person for ever in the king's grace; nay,

she is like enough to mark even me, for look how she gazes at me and speaks of scarlet because I wear it."

"It were indeed too hazardous," a woman's voice rang out from among the queen's retinue.

Ottorino started as if a viper had stung him, — but at that moment a noise and skirmish close by his side distracted his attention. Two haggard old women appeared on the terrace, struggling, screaming, and pushing their way through the mob, which buffeted them, plucking their long gray hairs and yelling, "The Moorish witches!" while they in turn made the air ring with cries of "Leila — Leila — mercy on our child, — she is mad — mad — mad!"

"Some of her kindred come to rescue their wandering offspring," said the king's masked counsellor, laughing outright. "Here is your lost lamb, shepherdesses of the devil! Guards, rescue them from the mob and bring them hither!"

The order was given just in time to save the two hags from some violent mark of popular hatred. As it was, when they were dragged on the terrace they presented an appearance so wild and ghastly that Leila, the instant she saw them, cowered down like a hare when the hounds are upon it.

"What forms are these — of purgatory or of hell?" sneered one of the cavaliers in attendance, as the two Moorish apothecaries prostrated themselves before the royal dais.

"Of neither, as yet — so please you," replied he in the scarlet suit, with an emphasis more than incidental. "Speak without fear, good grandames, and tell us what ails this wench, that she shrieks tales of murder and bloodshed as if it were the trade of your family?"

"We are but two poor, deserted women," said the

older, raising herself with her hands in a ghastly attitude of supplication. "And this offspring of the faithful has gone mad for the love of a Christian, who deserted her when the fruits of her guilt became manifest. She waked one night from a fearful dream, and would have it that he who taught her sin and left her remorse had been foully slain, — whence she fell into madness."

"Ancient women! Name to me the seducer of this hapless creature, and, by the Almighty God, were he the proudest vassal in our kingdom, he shall pay the penalty of the deed," said Manfred, in a voice trembling with pent-up wrath.

"Master and sovereign, — he concealed all but the name — Enrico — from his wretched paramour, dreading the justice of your laws," replied the older of the hags, with a ghastly smile, which gleamed upon her visage like phosphorus upon a skull.

"The punishment of death, — the king's Majesty holds that the crime deserved it?" said the scarlet cavalier, with slow emphasis.

"Dismiss the crones — I am not well," exclaimed Manfred, gasping for breath.

"Remove your unhappy child, good ancestresses," said the scarlet cavalier. "Methinks, mad as she is, she is too fairly moulded to be trusted away from your dusky abode. But to you, signor, we are much beholden for the uncommon zeal you have shown in gratifying the great wish of all our hearts."

The hags approached the shrinking girl, who for the first time evinced abject fear. The Visconti, although he was conscious that every eye in the assembly rested upon him, and guessed at some of the vile motives ascribed to his actions, stepped toward the kneeling girl and, raising her, informed the two hags that he would

himself escort them back to their habitation. Accordingly, amidst general murmurs of wonder and disapprobation, the entire group retired from the royal presence. The Lombard, who had now carefully closed his visor, supported the staggering steps of the mad girl, and was followed by the hags.

Still it might have been difficult for the old hags and their charge to pass through the enraged and muttering crowds, had not a monk in the habit of the Dominicans appeared, who commanded the throngs with his usual austerity and sway to make way for the Visconti. With his assistance they gradually cleared the piazza, but Leila's mind seemed once more vacant of all its memories and images, and she abandoned Ottorino's support, gamboling and singing before him to the great scandal of those who continued to gaze after them. The crones spoke not a word, although they continued to glower vindictively at their escort. When they reached the gates of the Moorish quarter, they muttered a profusion of thanks and blessings, and intimated that they were in need of the knight's services no longer. Fearing that much more interference would only exasperate her kindred against the poor girl, the Visconti admonished them to forgive the strange vagaries of her disease, and, wrapping his cloak closely around him, he turned to accompany the Dominican back to the city. To his chagrin, he found that the monk had disappeared, and that he was alone.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASS OF THE DOMINICANS

As Ottorino pondered over the extraordinary events which he had witnessed, fragments of the ferryman's tale leaped flashlike through his memory. He resolved to seek the Dominican in order to learn, if possible, the extent of Helena di Miraval's guilt in a deed but too well suited to her temperament. No consideration but revenge was to guide his future course, and he gradually worked himself up into a frenzy, in which no argument, however sane, could have prevailed against the turbulent passions which racked and swayed his soul.

Soon the Visconti found himself in the wilds of Monte Pellegrino, and, recalling all the observations which he had made on a previous visit, he followed the labyrinth of intricate corridors until he reached the Dominican's cell. It was lighted but by a dimly flickering taper, and his eager gaze could not discern the desired presence of the monk, who had most likely been delayed on the way to his habitation.

Determined at all hazards to await the friar's arrival, Ottorino stretched his weary limbs on the primitive couch of straw and rushes on which he had reposed on his former visit. But as the time passed and neither the Dominican nor Fra Cyrillo entered the dismal abode, a strange weariness began to creep over the Lombard. The

events of the past hours flitted shadow-like across his mind; he endeavoured to conjure before his soul the beloved image of his dreams, whose words of love had proven like the idle wind that leaves no trace,—then nature asserted her rights. The tension of his mind by degrees relaxed, his eyes closed, and Ottorino was soon in the land of oblivion. He woke from time to time, but each waking was of shorter duration than the preceding. Finally the feeling of anxiety which still lingered in his mind became blunted, and his ideas, inextricably confused, in the end vanished altogether.

While in this state he dreamed he was in a richly furnished apartment of the royal palace in company with Manfred, but the king before him had a vacant face and staring, glassy eyes. He spoke to him, but received no answer; he held out to him Matteo Visconti's letter, but no hand was stretched out to take it. The dreamer then fancied that he attempted to grasp the royal hand, but, though he did not see it withdrawn, the hand was not where he had imagined it to be, and it eluded his grasp.

What did it all mean? What strange change was happening now? The hangings, gildings, and ornaments of the room suddenly vanished; the walls, their sides appearing quite bare, seemed to become dark, rough, and contracted like those of a prison. The gilded ceiling turned into a black vaulted roof, and the pavement underneath parted, permitting a glimpse into a dungeon, strewn with decaying carcasses. But on the winding stairs, leading below, was stretched at full length Manfred, the fair-haired Hohenstaufen, a ghastly wound in his head, from which the helmet had fallen and rolled among the dead below.

At this juncture a confused medley of whispering voices struck the sleeper's ear and a light flashed across

his eyes, which were still closed. He fancied that he heard a voice continually calling out to him, "See, they are coming to murder you, — fly — fly for your life!" He then made an attempt to rise, to speak, to reach for his poniard, but, do what he would, he could not put one foot before the other; his voice seemed choked and his arms dropped paralyzed by his side.

He remained a few moments in this condition, then he found his throat tightly clutched and a heavy weight on his body; he shook himself, and on opening his eyes discovered it was not a dream.

Two ruffians were kneeling upon his chest, one was throttling him, the other, with a devilish grin of scorn and rage, was trying to stab him, while a third, standing in the shadow of the wall, seemingly to direct their movements, hissed, "Strike hard, Passerino — run him through the heart!"

There was something in the tone of the speaker which well-nigh paralyzed Ottorino's energies, for in the dim light of the room he fancied that he recognized in the ruffian with the stiletto the bravo he had so unceremoniously thrown overboard. After some fruitless efforts to escape from that powerful pressure, he at last succeeded in rolling over, so that he and his assailants were struggling together on the floor.

Freeing his right arm, which was pinned under him by one of the bravi, he succeeded by a dexterous movement in wrenching the weapon from Passerino's hand; not, however, before he had felt its sharp point pierce his breast. Gathering all his strength, he buried it in his assailant's side, with such force that he felt the hilt strike against the body.

With a groan the bravo rolled over, while his companion, amazed at the unexpected turn, relaxed his hold

on Ottorino long enough to allow the latter to stagger to his feet. When Ottorino turned on his other assailant, he found that he had vanished, and likewise the one who had so manifestly directed the assault.

Abandoning the idea of pursuit as fruitless and hazardous, he examined the wound from which he felt the warm blood oozing. A languor and inertness began to creep over his whole frame. Convulsive tremors shook his joints, and a giddiness seized upon him, which seemed to turn everything to darkness. He no longer felt the ground under his feet, and, staggering, he fell with a heavy thud upon the stone floor of the chamber, striking his head against some marble relic of antiquity. Stretched on his back, his head bleeding from behind so as to crimson his dark hair, and with the blood soaking through his silken doublet, he lay senseless and apparently dead.

While these events were transpiring in the Dominican's hermitage, the piazza fronting the stupendous Cathedral of Santa Rosalia presented a scene of singular solemnity. It was midnight. The distant peal of convent bells reverberated through the hushed and silent air, and the chant of pilgrims traversing the city at some distance was remotely audible. In the starlight, dim and paling before the rays of the moon, strange, muffled forms were to be seen gliding about; from side streets and alleys, from cellars and attics, from houses and taverns, they streamed noiselessly into the piazza. The bells seemed incessantly to call for more and more, as the loiterers delayed.

Through the open portals of the cathedral the dimly lighted altars in the background were visible. Ghostly fantastic shapes glided noiselessly in and out. The screen at the apse sparkled in the candle-light. Like a revela-

tion, the cross above it gleamed out of the gloom, but half of the immense interior was wrapped in sombre shadows. From the penetralia came the sound of priestly chanting. Before the altar, in a semicircle, knelt in silent prayer the Dominican brotherhood.

At the left of the door a monk stood with impassive face, before a solitary lighted candle, which shed its pale radiance from a niche in the wall. Before him, on a table, were piles of wax tapers, and every pilgrim or monk who entered bought a taper, lighted it, and, kneeling, placed it on one of the tripods before the screen. This slowly increasing illumination revealed monks and pilgrims and friars of all ages and all grades, beggars on crutches, and bravi with short cloaks and midnight visors.

Gradually the chant seemed to pervade the whole interior of the cathedral, flowing from shrine to shrine. A Dominican came out of the background with tinkling censer and incensed carefully every nook and corner till the church was filled with smoke and perfume. First, from the left, then from the right, rose the sombre chant of the brotherhood, echoing in sepulchral knells throughout the vast interior, while after each pause in the chant one light went out and dismal shadows began to creep upon the frescoed walls and painted columns.

Low and monotonous, but gaining force with every moment, the death-mass began.

" Dies iræ, dies illa
Solvat sæclum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sibylla.

" Liber scriptus proferetur,
In quo totum continetur
Unde mundus judicetur.

" Tuba mirum spargens sonum
Per sepulchra regionum
Coget omnes ante thronum.

" Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando judex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus.

" Mors stupebit et natura,
Cum resurget creatura,
Judicanti responsura.

" Judex ergo cum sedebit,
Quidquid latet apparebit,
Nil inultum remanebit."

Slowly the chant had increased in volume, up to the ending climax, "*Nil inultum remanebit*," when it softly died in undulating echoes, vibrating long after under the high, vaulted arches.

One taper after another had gone out, until but a group surrounded the high cross, and cast their diminished brilliancy over the silent crowd of worshippers.

Two muffled figures approached each other in a side aisle.

"The door of the emperor's tomb is open," whispered the one, awestruck, to his companion.

"Are the graves gaping and the dead taking the air?" questioned the other.

"Did the tomb open of its own accord?" interrogated a third.

"They say the emperor has arisen and was seen stalking through the vaults."

The speaker paused, gazing in awe upon the stooping form of what appeared to be almost a centenarian, who, barely supporting himself upon a hooked cane, such as pilgrims were in the habit of using, was bent almost double with age. His snow-white hair flowed in silvery waves down his back and shoulders, and his eyes seemed to disappear under the bushy lashes. Slowly he shuffled along, pausing at times as if to listen; suddenly he found himself face to face with the tall, commanding form of a Dominican, emerging from the shadows of remote shrines.

Once more the chant rose in antiphonic sequence, as if the spirits of the dead made response to the invocation of the living. It penetrated the dusk of hidden shrines

as if it pealed from the sombre gloom of the vaults where the vanquished slept in peace beside their victors:

“Lacrymosa dies illa,
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus —
Dona eis requiem!”

“What means the chant? Has the hour pealed at last, that is to lift the heavy burden from my soul?” the centenarian whispered to the immobile Dominican, whose presence he rather divined than saw.

“It is the death-mass of the Sicilian kingdom,” the monk responded, gloomily.

“The knell of the Suabian dynasty?” the old man repeated, hoarsely. “And who art thou, to look upon the dread hour as calmly as the judge who pronounces the doom?”

“An instrument of Providence, summoned hither, like thyself, to bear witness to the word that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon their children unto the third generation and the fourth!”

The old man raised his hands as if to ward off a blow, while his well-nigh extinct eyes peered through red, inflamed lids.

“I am old and near my grave,” he gasped. “Is the hour so nigh?”

“Thou who hast seen four generations from cradle to grave, — knowest thou the law of retribution? Or have these sightless orbs, these locks blanched with the snows of winter frosts, some stronger claim upon this earth?”

The centenarian passed his skeleton-like fingers through his long white hair.

“Will the hour never come when her screams will cease

to torment mine ears, her wild, piteous moans to drive my heart to madness? What is the terror of death compared with the agony of life!"

"Thou art Roger d'Hauteville?"

The centenarian nodded.

"I was a child with golden locks when face to face I saw the emperor Henry the Sixth as upon his fiery charger he rode into the gates of Palermo. His eyes were flaming wrath, his voice the thunder of the mountain cataract, his countenance a destructive storm-cloud. Before him all life withered, and a mighty wail went up to heaven. I was torn from my mother's arms, and she, having had both eyes and tongue torn out by the remorseless hand of the hangman, perished with hundreds of our noblest Normans, likewise mutilated, in the snake-haunted dungeons of Palermo. Oh, that cry, — that cry, — will the thunder of judgment ever drown the echoes of her death-wail?"

"Peace, old man — peace! There is a God in heaven, — and he is just!"

All the lights in the cathedral had gone out but one. Sombre gloom pervaded the vast nave, now almost deserted, save by the Dominican, whose kneeling form appeared in strange contrast to the dark shadows in the uneasily flickering flame of the last taper. The friar's white-haired companion had disappeared with the rest of the midnight worshippers. Phantom-like the monks had flitted from the shrines, when a muffled cavalier, entering quickly and throwing off his mantle, stepped directly in front of Fra Domenico.

"What seeks the Duke of Altamura at this place and this hour of the night?" calmly questioned the friar from under his cowl, rising from his kneeling posture.

"The hour is at hand," the duke returned, in hoarse

whispers. "The bonfires in Calabria announce the choice of the Conclave."

The Dominican nodded as one in a trance.

"What wouldst thou have me do?" he replied, in a voice strained and low.

"Thy duty, — and the behest of thy superiors!" the duke returned, fiercely.

"They speak not to me through thee! Deemest thou it so light a task to pronounce the damning judgment? Haste it not, — lest it precipitate thine own doom!"

"Charles of Anjou has landed at Ostia!"

The Dominican nodded in silence.

"The pontiff himself has blessed the banners of Provence!"

Again the silent nod.

"Boso Doaria has opened the gates of Birnio dei Lombardi to the Provençals!" the duke growled, hardly able to control himself at the sight of the friar's tranquillity.

A third silent nod, and Altamura's pent-up ire broke through its last restraint.

"Then why in the name of the foul fiend dost thou tarry? Why dost thou temporize? There are graver interests at stake than the paltry misgivings of a nameless friar! Is it for this that we have planned and toiled, but to be trapped at the last moment merely because the instrument obeys not its master?"

The Dominican raised his right hand.

"When the goblet is full to the brim, then only will it overflow! The legacy of Urban will be fulfilled — even to the letter! It is not for thee to judge the fitness of the hour; thou art not yet the successor of the Cæsars, and thy kingdom, duke, is yet a dream."

There was a momentary pause, during which the duke changed his tone of command to one of abject humility.

"Friar," he spoke at last, "I will give thee riches untold, thou shalt be second in the land but to the pontiff, and if the colic becomes epidemic, friar, thou shalt be his successor, under any Latin, Christian, or heathen name that may please thy palate, if thou wilt but do my bidding."

"I despise thy threats and I care not for thy gold," the Dominican replied, coldly. "Leave me to myself! Thou canst neither hasten nor retard the tread of destiny."

"But we cannot—must not—dare not delay," the duke replied, fiercely. "It concerns nothing less than the future and the fortunes of the house of Altamura!"

The monk gazed abstractedly into space.

"What are the fortunes of thy house to me?" he then replied, impatiently. "I have neither honours to confer nor crowns to give away,—I have not even a friend,—a rival,—who stands in my light—"

The duke turned ghastly pale at the Dominican's speech, his eyes started from their sockets, and his fingers convulsively grasped the hilt of his poniard, but the monk, raising himself to his full height, disarmed him with the icy stare of his dark eyes. Relaxing his hold of the weapon and adroitly changing the subject, the duke spoke with forced calmness:

"Thou art the confessor of the lady of Miraval?"

"And, if so, what is it of thy concern, Duke of Altamura? I aspire not to become thine."

"No,—it is not that," the duke faltered, as if hesitating to express his thoughts. Then, after a brief pause, he continued: "As her confessor thou canst sway her soul to whatever course thou wilt,—it is upon this subject I would touch."

"Thou forgettest, duke! We are not the advisers of those who seek us, — seek us without our asking. We receive the confession, we grant absolution, — the silence of the grave covers the past."

The duke gazed for a moment irresolutely at the monk, abashed by his determined manner. Presently a thought seemed to flash through his mind. Approaching the Dominican, whose eyes relaxed their vigilance not for a moment, he spoke in an undertone, as if in dread of the sound of his own voice:

"To be brief, monk, — we have a high-born match in view for her, which, if consummated, will make her the proudest lady in Italy."

He broke off, for the Dominican's eyes glared like those of an infuriated tiger. Stamping his foot upon the floor, he hissed into the duke's face:

"What are thy plans — thy matches to me? Tell them to the ravens and vultures that fatten off the carcasses of thy kinswoman's rejected suitors, that they may sharpen their beaks to tear out the heart of another! Get thee hence, duke, ere I curse the hour that led thy footsteps hither!"

The duke controlled his anger with a supreme effort, and continued:

"Nay, — have patience, good monk, and if thou canst not otherwise allay thy strange midnight scruples, imagine this to be thy confessional, though I spurn thine absolution. Now, our kinswoman, headstrong and self-willed as she is, refuses to listen alike to entreaties and threats, nor does she as much as vouchsafe a reason for rejecting the most devoted of suitors, and our suspicions point to the presence of one who exercises such a potent spell over her heart that she in all truth imagines that she loves him."

"Which right thou deniest her," the monk interrupted the speaker.

"Shall we cast her into the arms of the first beggar-knight who attracts her roaming fancy, when she could be Empress of Italy?"

"Again, what is thy behest? Speak or leave me! Thou poisonest the very air! *Salve me, Jesu!* How darest thou, with the vile passions of thine unexpurgated soul still palpitating within thee, — how darest thou approach Fra Domenico?"

"Patience, good friar, patience! We come anon to the question. The welfare of the Lombard envoy is very dear to us; we would be disconsolate came he to harm in the exercise of his peaceful mission. We know he has sought thine advice before, — renew thy warning, good monk! Meanwhile I will steel my soul to patience and await thy summons, but tarry not too long, good friar, lest we be tempted to usurp thine office and cheat heaven out of the soul of a saint!"

"Begone and leave me to myself," the Dominican replied, fiercely, and the duke, after wrapping himself in his long Spanish mantle and drawing the wide brim of his hat over his eyes so as to completely shade his features, disappeared with a mute greeting. At the same moment the light of the last taper was extinguished, and the cathedral was left in almost complete darkness, but for the rays of the moon which stole here and there into its dense, incense-saturated gloom.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFESSIONS

DURING the following day Ottorino enjoyed but a degree of twilight consciousness. He afterward remembered that he had been borne along gently but rapidly, then all was lost until, opening his eyes on a terrace of soft grass, numerous faces swam around him, and he had a distinct recollection of a hooded nun washing his wounded breast with some balmy fluid, while diverse sages in black mantles and furred caps spoke in low and mysterious mutterings. He remembered little more until, waking with a start from deep slumbers, he found himself extended on a magnificent couch, covered with scarlet velvet brocade, and propped on cushions of white satin. The walls were hung with arras, wrought with representations of the loves of the gods, and the furnishings of the apartment were in keeping with the splendour of the decorations. Among all the persons around him, Ottorino recognized but one, Canaletto, though the captain's sober demeanour well-nigh staggered the Lombard's consciousness. He began to make inquiries, which that worthy for some time avoided answering, until he found that his young lord was more irritated at his silence than he could possibly have been at his speech. Ottorino thus learned that Canaletto and Fra Cyrillo, having been engaged in a drinking-bout, had, after many strenuous

efforts to put each other *hors de combat*, betaken themselves to the Dominican's hermitage, where they had been most effectually sobered by the discovery of Ottorino's apparently lifeless form stretched upon the blood-stained floor.

"I shall soon recover from the loss of blood," Ottorino replied, after a few moments of silent musing, "and, unless I may right myself on those who have so foully conspired, we have little further to seek in Palermo, and will depart, content that our bruises are no worse."

Canaletto grunted assent.

"I shall be blamed by the mediciners for stirring you up, and hark, — a millet-seed against a watermelon, — here comes one now," he exclaimed, hearing a footstep. He would have lost his wager, for the opening door admitted the Dominican.

The visage of the friar was even more pale than usual, and his demeanour appeared perturbed. He stood for a moment irresolutely on the threshold, then, advancing toward Ottorino's couch, he beckoned to Canaletto to retire.

The captain refused.

"Nay, reverend father, I cannot leave my master for an instant, for so I promised the gentle nun," he said.

"The nun — what nun?" The Dominican started. "Have you a nun among your attendants?"

"And I am pledged to let no one too closely approach my master, or to apply any medicaments save those under her own sanction," Canaletto continued, resolutely, and with a suspicion in his manner, which instantly struck Ottorino.

"Where are we?" the Lombard faltered, for the first time scanning his surroundings.

The Dominican cast a glance of silent wonder at the

questioner, then, without heeding the query, he spoke in a voice resonant of trouble and anguish:

"Then even in the presence of thy stout man-at-arms must I bid thee beware. I know that some frenzy has deceived thee into mistrust of mine intents. Thou art deaf to my predictions and warnings, deaf here in this very chamber, which beheld a lover, on the eve delirious with happiness,—at midnight a bleeding corpse. Ah! Thou knowest the story of Corrado da Polenta,—I tell thee, suffer no woman, unskilful or too skilled, to approach thy wounds, if thou desirest to leave this ominous chamber a living man."

Ottorino started up convulsively from his cushions.

"Since last we met, frate, I have had much cause to remember thy warnings, faithful as the ravens. But where are we? What of these chambers?"

"Thou art under Altamura's roof, and again I counsel thee, depart from Palermo, depart in all haste! Thou hast been here altogether too long; thou hast been altogether too busy, stirring up the foul corpses in the slime, and the duke sees more in thy mission than thou wouldst avow. But," he added, with a shrug, "if these chambers are dumb to thee, the eloquence of an angel were in vain."

"Does the ointment pain you?" Canaletto turned to his master.

"On the contrary," Ottorino replied, "it soothes the wound, as if the hand of love had applied it."

"Then I know not what you speak of poison and drugs, for I believe the nun who visits you is none but the lady of Miraval herself, as I noticed when she did not believe herself watched."

"Can this be possible,—after all," exclaimed Ottorino, staring at the friar in blank amazement.

The latter rose to depart.

"Let this oracle remain with thee, my son; even if the fancy, or the passion, or the passing love of a woman save thee now, thou art doomed only to more certain destruction, which all the hooded disciples of Galenus, — which no human agency can prevent."

He bowed and withdrew from the apartment, while Ottorino, sinking back into his cushions, relapsed into his former reveries, and gradually drifted softly to sleep.

When the Dominican reached the corridor, he met two disciples of that learned art whose imposing costumes did much to impose upon human credulity. They were accompanied by two females, one a closely veiled nun, the other some grave, stately dame in black satin robe and hood. The Dominican paused, eying the nun with a piercing glance, to which she only replied by a reverential bend of the head, then the four disappeared within the chamber occupied by the Visconti.

The Dominican remained some time irresolute, then his ear caught the sound of approaching footsteps, and, precipitately retreating behind a column, he peered through the dusk. Crivello, the Catalan, strode by him so closely that he almost touched him, disappearing in a remote chamber at the end of the corridor.

The Dominican did not stir, but seemed to be revolving some plan in his mind.

"This Spaniard is wrapped in the very odour of death," he muttered to himself. "And the credulous victim trusts to a woman's love! A woman's love! It is a problem worth expounding, — but was it ever solved?"

He raised his head, as if listening. The soft jar of an opening door, whispering voices, and the sound of many footsteps broke into his reverie, and forthwith the two sages, the nun, and her attendant went by him. He

waited until they had passed, then, with a deep sigh, the Dominican pursued his way through an intricate labyrinth of corridors, until he found himself before a massive oaken door before which he passed.

Something like a sob was faintly audible from within, and without another moment's hesitation he softly opened the door and entered. At the threshold, however, he paused once more and stared aghast at the scene which presented itself to his gaze.

It was a high, vaulted chamber, dimly lighted by tall, perfumed tapers. The tapestries, hangings, and also the carpets were of a rich crimson, while the ceiling was ornamented with the sculpture of a period which seemed to antedate the construction of the palace itself. In the chamber, which seemed to serve the purpose of an oratory, Helena di Miraval knelt before an iron cross, which rose from the elevated flooring. Her bare arms were entwined about those of the cross, while her head hung over her bosom, and she was weeping with such anguish that its heartrending expression moved even the monk. She did not now wear the habit of the cloister, but a loose gown of soft, dark texture, and so wrapt was she in her grief that she neither heard the Dominican enter, nor became aware of his presence till he stood almost before her, uttering the greeting of the brotherhood.

Helena started up, and at first she was so amazed at having had an unexpected witness of her sorrow that she changed colour repeatedly, while she dashed away the tears which were streaming down her face.

"Thy pardon, father," she then faltered. "I thought I was alone with my grief, and had no witness but heaven. I did not hear thee enter, but perhaps it is as well. Be seated, father, and forget what thou hast seen, for my grief is great."

"There is no grief, no sorrow, which Holy Church cannot mitigate, daughter. If it be the fault of another, she may mediate; if the cause lies within thyself, she may counsel and strengthen. Thou weepest for one convalescent under this very roof?"

The monk had by degrees assumed his usual austere demeanour, and this discomposed Helena almost as much as his perspicuity.

"Thou knowest, father," she faltered; then, as if ashamed of her weakness, she covered her face with her hands and was silent.

The Dominican watched her for a few moments, and so intense was the stillness in the room that the beatings of their hearts could have been heard.

"Even so," the monk at last spoke slowly and relentlessly. "Even so! What is there between thee and him?"

"I have been maligned to him, father. He loathes and despises me, — yes, he even hinted that I had come to poison him," and, as if the memory was too much, Helena broke down and wept in silence.

Whatever the friar's feelings were, his pale visage did not betray them, as he replied:

"Who is the author of this fateful dirge? Poison him? In whose interest could be such a deed? But how camest thou to know the knight's thoughts?"

"It was into my face he hurled the accusation, father, and, as for its author, I guess him but too well."

"To thy face, daughter?" the monk exclaimed, with feigned surprise. "The Lombard is confined to his chamber, — how could that be?"

"I entered his apartment," Helena stammered, blushing and embarrassed. "It was but to see that he was

wanting for nothing. Surely, that was no crime, but, if it was, I found the chastisement even in the offence!"

"*Distinguendum est inter et inter*, — thy sex often mistakes regret for repentance. But thou art strangely pale, daughter, — or is there more behind all this than thy speech acknowledges?"

"Father, thou hadst warned me! Oh, had I but taken heed! It stings my proud soul to the quick to think that his love should have changed into hate and scorn!"

"Love — hate — scorn? Of what speak we? Of whom speak we?" said the monk, turning very pale and gazing at the woman before him with a degree of fierceness which almost deprived her of the last degree of composure.

"The Visconti saved my life! I loved him when first his haughty gaze fell upon me; I was the first, the only woman to conquer his proud heart. Some dark agency has sown distrust between us, for to mine entreaties he vouchsafed no response; I have lost him — lost him — and yet I know not how, nor why!"

She spoke hurriedly, in almost inarticulate gasps, and her words died away in a wail of anguish.

"And for this, then, thou hadst him brought hither," the Dominican replied, slowly, "to make him reap the deserts of his faithlessness?"

Helena stared a moment at the speaker ere the whole enormity of his words struck her.

"Holy Virgin! I would rather perish in despair and misery than that aught of ill should befall him."

"He rests in a likely chamber, — a chamber with a history," the Dominican replied, darkly. "And if the ground should open under him at midnight, strange spectres crowd his couch and make his breath uneasy, he would fain think it nothing strange, after the

shameless sight he beheld at the Carnival, when the lady of Miraval appeared in so evil a rôle. Marry, I do not wonder that the feelings of thy Lombard have changed from love to hate!"

"Carnival — evil part? Thou art deceived, father, — thou, too, with the Visconti and many others. No matter what offence I have committed, — of this, at least, I am not guilty. It is another of my sex who impersonated the fairy, exposing a beauty equal to mine to the lascivious gaze of the rabble. But what of this chamber? Knowest thou of any peril threatening him within these walls?"

The Dominican laughed sarcastically, but was silent.

"Jest not in a matter like this! Thou knowest, — new horrors, — more blood, — will the direful gulf never close? Speak, father, or his blood be on thy head!"

The friar staggered, raising his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"On my head? On my head? My burden is now almost greater than I can bear. I know of naught, — but if thou hast the least fear, the remotest foreboding, trust him not to remain one night alone! After thou hast done this, renounce him — renounce him for aye and ever! He can never belong to thee. A Visconti can never mingle his blood with the accursed race of Altamura. The past cries out against thee, and the heavens frown upon your union. Drive this unholy passion from thy heart, daughter, — a convent, the seclusion of the cloister, is the only safety for Helena di Miraval! Madden me not with thy refusal, else revel out thy dream in the everlasting flames! Ay, — something prompts me that it were holy work to stop thine onward rush — even with death!" shouted the monk, convulsively.

"What meanest thou? What sayest thou?" exclaimed Helena, starting at the strange words of the Dominican. "Is it a crime to love? Is it a crime to choose the one to whom that immortal spark of our existence, borrowed from the sacred fires of heaven, draws us, rather than suffer with loathing the unwelcome embrace of another? But what knowest thou of love, thou, a monk, to whom it is a sealed book for ever? My heart knows no sin in this, my love, and I will love him if all the powers of darkness stand between him and me — now and for ever."

A deadly pallor had overspread Helena di Miraval's countenance as defiantly she faced the Dominican with the majesty of a queen, her eyes flashing unalterable resolve.

The monk staggered as if he had been dealt a deadly blow, and drew his cowl deeper over his face, as if to hide its unearthly pallor. Frightened at her own words, Helena approached him with a supplicating gesture, timidly touching the hem of his robe.

"Forgive me, father," she faltered, "forgive me! I knew not what I said. But the anguish within me is so keen, and the terror of my soul nearly stifles me! Oh, speak, answer me, father! Thou frightenest me! If I have committed an offence, what penance — holy virgin! he is struck with death!"

The monk raised his head.

"Peace — peace! Nothing ails me, — fasting and too long thoughts of this anguish. *Salve me, Jesu*, — I am going!"

For a moment he paused, drawing a deep breath.

"Love — fate — renunciation," he then muttered, starting as if waking from a dream. "It was not to be, — it was not to be! Fare thee well, Helena di Miraval."

Thou shalt not have further need of a confessor. When we meet again it will be before a higher tribunal. Fare thee well!"

And raising his hands as if pronouncing a benediction, the Dominican left Helena di Miraval to muse over his strange words and stranger actions.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TORTURE - CHAMBER

It was brightening into dawn, and the first faint glimmer which entered the torture-chamber in the Torre del Diavolo lighted the livid, passion marred face of Altamura. The duke was engaged in earnest discourse with his fair captive, who, seated on an instrument of torture resembling a cross with joints and steel screws, was calmly reasoning against a suspicion which, it seemed, had caused this early visit, namely, that the superstitious castellan had suffered some one in the garb of a monk to enter within the forbidden gates.

"Nay, — with mine own eyes have I beheld him," the duke exclaimed, impatiently interrupting her. "I watched him from the Campanile to the secret entrance, and I will know who he is and who gives him the means of entrance. Crivello denies all part therein, but I will know, or the rack on which you lean shall fail for the first time."

Francesca smiled with disdain at the cruel instrument, and replied, carelessly:

"Are men to be thus subdued, — by fleshly torments only?"

"And feign you that your woman's form would not shrink from the ordeal?" returned the duke, with a strange glare.

"I have a torture within that mocks at all things of fear and anguish," replied Francesca. The door opened as she spoke, and admitted Crivello and the Dominican.

"Your pardon, father, for disturbing your rest ere cock's crow, the student's hour," the duke said, with grave irony. "For I doubt not it was disturbed, — how, Crivello?"

"I found the father at his devotions," the Catalan replied, reverently.

"I will not long interrupt them, if my questions are answered as I shall put them," said the duke. "Tell me, good friar, is my memory at fault, or are you not the same one who released from his vows the black monk, and suffered him to aid me in a work which I have much at heart?"

"It was I who suffered him to aid thee in a work which I have much at heart, and whereof thou art the destined but blind instrument," the Dominican replied, with significance. "I did not think the time so near at hand then, and yet when the summons came I was praying for the earliest moment when I could be released from every bond in the flesh and commence the predestined toil. Ay, — and it is I who will conjure up before thee the sepulchral shapes of thy mangled victims, it is I who will guide the pale shade of that fair-haired boy into thy sleepless midnight, it is I who will make thee so utterly desperate that thou shalt seek the tombs of the dead as a resting-place from thy never-ending terrors!"

"Monk — what ravest thou?" exclaimed Francesca, with a gesture full of warning and terror.

"Truths which the rack would not extort from me, lady, and therefore I fear not! Yes, Duke of Altamura, the devils themselves were wroth listening to the audience

of thy crimes. Henceforth thou art at my mercy, since thou darest not destroy the vessel which contains the lightnings of heaven, since the fiends that haunt thee will not permit thee to compel thy kinswoman's choice! Thou hast but one refuge, — to destroy the power 'gainst whom we are leagued and to kneel at the feet of the Holy Father, — to receive what it shall please him to give thee!"

"Monk — demon! It cannot be that I dream!" exclaimed the duke, gasping for breath and tossing back from his brow his damp hair. "I to lose my clutch on destiny? Thou hast early intelligence, or whence thy wisdom?"

His agitation bathed the duke's brows in continued rushes of cold perspiration and shook his form with the convulsive starts and shiverings of an ague. After a pause he continued:

"If this be true, thou hast accomplices even here among ourselves, — or art thou a magician, too, familiar of hell? I know it, — thou art, for I beheld thine accursed visage in a swoon in the ruins where thou dwellest!"

"Then thou mightest have spared thyself the pains to ask," replied the unmoved monk.

"Whence thy daring, friar?" the duke exclaimed, furiously. "But I shall know it ere we part! Confess who has stirred thee on to play this strange and persevering part, — confess, or I will find a way to make thee!"

"Bring thy tortures, bring thy racks and thy burning irons, the wild beast's fang, boiling oil and molten lead, — thou canst not harm me! Behind me stands the power of Rome, that will crush thee like vermin if thou rebel.

But I am calm now! The barriers of doubt are passed, and death has no terrors for Fra Domenico."

"Friar, thou art made of the stuff which I need in my designs," ejaculated the duke, his desperate thoughts gleaming madly in his eyes. "Were the moment but ripe! Thou shalt be pontiff, thou shalt sit in the chair of St. Peter, — another emperor shall bend his knees before thee at Canossa, standing three days with bare feet in Alpine snows, thou shalt hurl the anathema 'gainst the princes of the earth, if thou wilt but avow the means by which secrets are known to thee which even hell would not dare to dream of."

"Hast thou the pontificate to give away, duke, or the thrones of the earth?" the Dominican replied, derisively.

"Then shall the tortures wrest thine accomplice from thee, for with mine own eyes have I seen thee enter this tower at midnight, and, by the fiends, I'll know the purpose!"

"Use thy tortures! I am all marble now, and refuse to answer thy questions!"

"Ferrando, — whether from the angels or the fiends, thou thyself knowest the power of the friar," said Francesca, amazed at the Dominican's dangerous revelations.

"Why, — then it was an angel I beheld opening the entrance to the tombs below, — yea, it wore thy form," returned the duke, gazing fiercely upon her, clutching her hand and dashing it away. "Thou — thou, too, hast betrayed me! I see it all now! That Lombard puppet is but the spy of thy kinsman, who dared not beard me openly, but I have provided against even this stroke of treason and ingratitude."

"Spy, — treason, — ingratitude? Monster, thou who shed a gloom around the name of an innocent woman to further thy fiendish ends! Monster! And my life, —

my destroyed name and fame, — I could slay thee with my own hands!" cried Francesca, starting and standing before the duke in an attitude of wild and utter defiance.

"We shall learn of this anon," cried the duke, his eyes flaming with diabolical and frenzied brilliancy, but the woman's despair had passed all thoughts of fear.

"Darest thou speak aught 'gainst the gray hairs of him whose heart I have broken, seducer and destroyer that thou art? If all thy crimes obtain their just revenge, the fiend himself must abdicate his tortures to thee! But do thy worst! I smile to think that thy kinswoman is at last warned against thy destructive craft, and thine intended victim, the Lombard, has escaped thee!"

There was a long and dreadful silence, during which the duke gazed steadfastly at his companions.

"Lead them both away," he said, at last, to the Catalan, starting as if from a dream. "My brain is on fire, and since their madness laughs at the paltry tortures around us, we will devise others. Take them away, Crivello, — out of my sight! Magic they shall indeed have need of, if either of them leave these walls again alive!"

"Farewell, then," said Francesca, calming suddenly from her fury. "But not below, — it should be here! It would be an expiation to perish by thy hand! Kill me here, Ferrando, — I can die as calmly by thy hand as the lamb that has followed the butcher to the slaughter-house!"

"And therefore thou shalt not!" replied the duke. "Away with them both — to the dungeons beneath the vaults!"

"Dare to lay thy blood-stained hands on Fra Domenico," the friar spoke, raising himself to his full height, while his eyes flashed fire and his pale features appeared

more haggard than before, "and I will hurl thee to thy doom ere another moon has been born in the skies!"

"Away with them, ere I forget myself," raged the duke, and Crivello, not daring to intercede for the Dominican, humbly obeyed. Returning in an excess of perturbation, which kept his whole frame in an aspen tremble, he found the duke so lost in thought that it was several minutes ere he noticed his entrance.

"My lord, — and is all lost?" he said, at last, in a hollow whisper.

"Lost? What is lost? She only knows what she ever suspected, but she dares not betray the secret!" the duke exclaimed, noticing the words, but scarcely the speaker. "Away! Nothing is lost while I remain myself. She will weave it as a spell of terror round my head; yet, — deem you we were not enjoying our siesta in the dungeons of Palermo if the king believed or knew this tale? With his own hands would he avenge that fair-haired boy, e'en though his life would have overshadowed his throne. But I tell you all goes well. I have already foiled them all," continued the duke, in a sort of delirious vivacity. "The king trusts us because he hears the rumbling under the cover of our loyalty; played we in truth the hypocrite, we would long have been smothered by the weight of suspicion. As for our secret alliance with Anjou, — I need but the proof of his plotting to force from him the lever that shall lift the Latin world. Think you I rave, Crivello? Think so — for a day!"

"Might we not learn all we have to fear from the prisoners below?" replied Crivello, with a significant glance at the instruments of torture.

"You are mistaken, Catalan, these terrors cannot move them in their present frenzy," the duke said, hurriedly. "I know not why, — but even her fierce spirit against

me kindled me with a sort of pity. I would not have her fine limbs marred and shattered with these wrenching pangs."

"Hunger and thirst might do something, and yet not harm her beyond repair," remarked the worthy Castellan of the Torre. "I have known thirst very grievous to bear, and hers would be the more clinging since the Oreto flows beneath her dungeon bars."

"Deny her nothing! It is the mind, not the body, we must assail," returned the duke, sternly. "But some one is knocking for admission! Our expected guest, perchance,—admit him, Crivello, and conduct him hither. These racks are strangely truth inspiring,—even as the presence of one's confessor!"

The Catalan disappeared, and after a brief interval, during which the duke paced the gloomy chamber with rapid strides, he returned with the Count of San Severino. The Apulian recoiled in horror at the sight of the equipments, among which the duke moved as carelessly as if they constituted his daily pastime. Upon recognizing his early visitor, the duke, with a grim smile, bade him be seated.

"What a gruesome abode!" San Severino remarked, with a shudder, vainly endeavouring to appear unconcerned, and wincing under Altamura's serpent gaze.

"A theatre fit to stage its drama," the duke replied, with a supercilious smile. "But thou comest as if the wish had summoned thee. The old raven was croaking sorely. Suspects he nothing?"

"Nothing!" was the laconic reply, while San Severino uneasily scanned his surroundings.

"And he left convinced?"

A hideous smile lit up the Apulian's features.

"He came to the grotto prepared to see!"

Altamura nodded approval.

"Caserta will work out his own revenge — and ours."

"The avalanche has started that shall hurl the Hohenstaufen to their doom," San Severino, slightly reassured by the duke's seemingly preoccupied air, replied with grim satisfaction. "But I came on a matter to me of graver import, — the fulfilment of our compact!"

"The fulfilment of our compact!" the duke repeated, with deliberate slowness. "Is the hour so near at hand?"

"Love annihilates time!" the Apulian exclaimed, with a show of bravado, rising suddenly, then reseating himself.

The duke regarded his visitor with a strange look.

"Thou admirest our kinswoman's shape! I fear she is less fond of thine. She has never evinced passion for bones either in fish or flesh."

San Severino coloured to his very temples.

"By San Gennaro, duke, the jest goes too far!"

The duke laughed.

"What wouldst thou have, San Severino? I fear we do not quite comprehend each other. Speak out, man, speak boldly, for none hears thee save the devil, thy sponsor, and Altamura, thy friend!"

"Truly, thou art in a most jocund mood," the Apulian growled, with ill-concealed vexation. "Caserta has seen Manfred and Violanthe; I crave the hand of the lady of Miraval, which thou hast promised me in no uncertain terms!"

"Thou sayest I promised thee the hand of the lady of Miraval!" the duke spoke, after a brief pause. "I told thee, go and woo her, if she will have thee for her husband I bless the union. Hast thou done according?"

"Have I done according?" exclaimed the Apulian, with flashing eyes. "Ask thy Spanish man-at-arms what

befell the most devoted of suitors on the threshold of his lady's chamber. I will kill the varlet, — I have sworn it!"

"Thou art quite right!" the duke replied, with a sneering smile. "Why shouldst thou pine for unrequited love, since God created woman in his ire? But hopest thou in very truth that the Duke of Altamura will force his kinswoman to wed against her will?"

"Your Grace is pleased to make me a fool and a mock! I care not how I win the lady, whether it be with her consent or without, — nor is it too late to whisper a word in Caserta's ear."

"With her consent or without," repeated the duke, absently, as if struck with some dark thought. Then, seating himself opposite his visitor on an instrument of torture, he gazed abstractedly at the dark curtain behind San Severino. Just then the head of Crivello peered through, his eyes fixed upon his master as if for some signal. The duke nodded, and Crivello disappeared.

"Perchance the lady may repent of her harshness and consent to receive the bird she has rejected into her bower. But I tell thee, count, — rather than wed this lady, were she Dame Venus herself, I would wed the fiend's eldest daughter, with damnation for her dowry!"

"Were she even that, and death the high priest to solemnize our nuptials, I would go to my grave with rapture if only her beauty shared it with me," replied the unmoved Apulian.

The duke shrugged his shoulders, while a sardonic smile played around his lips.

"Ye cannot blame some eggs for hatching crocodiles, — though perchance it is the devil's masterpiece."

San Severino's dismal aspect acknowledged the effect

of the duke's observation, and the latter, receiving no reply to his eulogy, continued:

"It cannot be her maiden modesty that gives thy love such frosty sunshine, thus preventing thee from becoming fortune's idiot. It is in vain to deny what the whole world whispers,—ask me not whence I derive my knowledge. Once more, San Severino, let thy request wait the hour. The lady may repent."

"The party of San Severino did not conclude as advantageous a peace with Frederick's bastard as the Duke of Altamura! I demand the immediate fulfilment of the promised nuptials."

"What wouldst thou have, San Severino? The iron crown of Lombardy, the Holy Grail, or the eye-teeth of the caliph? Deemest thou the lady of Miraval so obedient?"

"Once thou wert not wont to ask her pleasure!"

"That was ere that cursed Lombard, on whom she squanders her doting fancies, came to Palermo. But for the sincerity of my intents, this confidence may vouch, and, moreover, I frankly avow that, if I saw not my own interests in thine, I should have sought my allies in some other quarter. Heed not my humours, strange as they may seem, for women are ever a thorn in my side. But,—is it possible,—thou wearest steel beneath satin?" the duke concluded, with a sneer, as San Severino's silken doublet, parting at the throat owing to the defective fastening of the clasp, revealed a coat of linked mail beneath.

"I do," the Apulian replied, stung to the quick by this hidden taunt, "and take antidotes before all meals, and sleep in chambers so well barred and locked that even the invisible slayers of the youth Enrico can hardly come at my throat."

"And thou dost well," the duke slowly replied, while he rose, and a sinister light gleamed in his eyes, "for he who aspires to the love of our kinswoman is apt to clasp the burning hand of the devil in the leaves instead of the golden fruit. Ho, Crivello —"

Before the import of Altamura's speech dawned on the outwitted tool of the duke's intrigues, he heard the rush of armed feet, and ere another word was spoken he felt his arms clutched on both sides and found himself surrounded by a group of Crivello's Catalans.

"Nay, — look not so black, San Severino, — 'tis but thine executioners who stand behind thee," Altamura sneered, as with arms folded across his chest he eyed his victim. "Ha! Thou didst well to trust thyself in the lion's den. It is not too late to whisper a word in Caserta's ear? I will send thee to hell, San Severino, for the devil to make sport of thy soul, but ere thou goest my strangler shall make sport of thy carcass!"

Every trace of colour deserted the cheeks of the trapped dupe of Altamura at these terrible words.

"May then my curse overtake thee on the loftiest pinnacle of thy misbegotten power and damn thee below Cain, thy prototype," yelled the infuriated nobleman, making a desperate effort to spring at his betrayer, but the men-at-arms locked him too firmly in their grasp.

"I have slept calmly under a mountain of woman's curses, and I do not think men's weigh much heavier," replied the duke, with a shrug. "Away with him!"

After the doomed Apulian had been led away by his captors, the duke remained for a few moments alone, awaiting Crivello's return. The Catalan soon reëntered the chamber with a significant nod.

"The Lombard still living?" The duke turned to his follower. "Thou hast wondrous ill luck, Don Crivello, —

wondrous ill luck! Remain in the Torre and keep sure watch, and have thou the thousand eyes of Argus on what passes here; let all who wish to enter come in, — but let no one depart!" The duke then wrapped himself in his mantle and abruptly left the chamber. The castellan, after a last parting glance at his retreating form, disappeared in the dark recesses of the Torre del Diavolo.

Entering upon a narrow, winding path, which was completely obscured from view by overhanging branches and thickly entwined shrubbery, the duke was soon lost amidst the trees and underbrush of the vale of the Oreto. The dark outlines of the monastery of the Capuchins, with its huge subterranean galleries of mummified monks, widening here and there into spacious halls, unroofed and open to the air of heaven, were reflected against the clear blue sky. Toward this romantic labyrinth the duke wended his steps. Gradually the path began to slope between horizontally rising walls of rock, whence orange-trees sent their luxuriant shoots upward to greet the light. Here and there the wild fig burst from the living rock, mixed with lentisk and pendent caper-plants. Old olive-trees split the mosses of perpendicular cliffs with their corded, tough, and snakelike roots, while the pomegranates gleamed flamelike amidst the foliage of lustrous green. The ivy hung in long festoons, waving like tapestry in the breath of stealthy breezes. The curly leaves of a tangle of acanthus gave scant admission to the rays of the noonday sun, which flooded with golden haze the surrounding groves and loggias. In the far perspective the cloisters of Monreale, with their adjacent cypress-groves, stood out in clear silhouette against the horizon.

The duke entered the loggia, the deserted appearance of which justified the theory that it served as an abode

of crime, or worse. Soon after, strange, muffled forms were to be seen approaching the lonely villa and disappearing in its dark recesses. One by one they came, and after some twenty had made the descent the influx ceased and no sound of human tread broke the noonday stillness.

The moon was shining brightly in cloudless heavens when the duke, the last to emerge, stepped from the loggia. Nodding approval at the deserted state of the Locanda, he was about to retrace his steps toward the Torre, when he recoiled as if he had been bitten by a snake, for before him, as if they had risen from the bowels of the earth, stood the two Moorish hags. Upon recognizing him they instantly bowed with many grotesque Oriental bends, but the lurking scorn on the blue lips of the one, the viperous glitter in the black eyes of the other, would have caused alarm in a heart less stout than that of the duke.

"Good even, sisters of hell, what seek ye on hallowed ground at this hour?" he burst forth, as soon as he had recognized the noble pair.

The older gave a dark and lowering scowl, pursing up her thin lips, while the younger smiled more terribly.

"We seek an herb which grows but on the graves of suicides and murderers," she said. "Our star guided us hither, — though our search has just begun."

Glancing with mingled loathing and terror at their fiendish countenances, the duke abruptly commanded them to declare for whom they were gathering the nocturnal herb.

"It is for the noble duke," the younger of the sisters declared. "Our star has told us that the noble duke will shortly require a potion, and it must be brewed under influences which require some delay. We have brewed it

for many generations of men in one century of time, we, who have seen three generations from cradle to tomb."

A suspicion flashed across the duke's mind, and he asked, quickly:

"Mean ye a love potion, nocturnal sisters, something to overcome coldness, — indifference, — aversion?"

The two hags looked at each other with a sinister smile, which strengthened the duke's suspicions.

"Hags! Fiends!" he burst out, in sudden fury. "Is it for the lady in the Torre ye are using your nightly skill? Confess it, — or, by your false prophet, I will have ye smoked out of your devil's garden ere the moon be two hours older!"

"Pillar of wisdom," said the elder, with a grotesque bow, "we brew not for the lady, we brew for thee, noble duke. Thou wilt require our art to silence the shades who rise from their graves at the dread midnight hour, — and they demand a victim."

The duke shuddered.

"I know something of your art; I know ye have direful secrets. Ancient women, do ye but jest or make vaunt of a knowledge ye do not possess? Who is it ye are weaving this spell for?"

The sorceresses looked at each other as if taking silent counsel, then the one who had been the spokeswoman replied with a bow:

"That we may not reveal. But if your Grace will deign to accept the proof of our skill, — and we have secrets to make the very fiend beautiful, — the castellan wishes us well —"

"I care naught to have the fiend beautified," replied the duke, "but," he added, as if struck with a certain thought, "if ye could procure some elixir of a — transcendent power, I would reward your toil as richly as

a dying king the physician who restores him to life and health."

"You tax our skill too lightly, glorious duke; the essence you require is one of the least of the secrets we possess."

The duke mused profoundly for several minutes, the two sisters watching him with intense eagerness, but when he raised his eyes and encountered the gray, malignant twinkle in the snakelike orbs of the older, he gave a start, and the same undefined suspicion seemed to re-enter his mind.

"Spare thine eloquence," he said; "what I see of thy skill, that will I believe, but be well assured that the ingredients of your charm work their unpronounced intent, else worse will happen to yourselves than even the torture-chambers ye have seen wot of." Again the hags looked at each other in silence, but, bending low, the elder said, with Oriental apathy:

"The noble duke was born to command, and we to obey."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPECTRE OF THE TORRE

IT was a day or two after these events, and an hour or two after sunset.

Crivello the castellan was fretfully perambulating in a gallery of the Torre del Diavolo, examining doors and windows, and at times pausing to listen, when suddenly he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Starting around, he beheld a muffled figure, the brim of the broad Spanish hat drawn deeply over his eyes. His hand flew to his poniard, but the stranger raised the broad lapels of his hat, disclosing the features of Altamura.

"Hope has a light step, for I have walked in your tracks these minutes and yet you caught no echo," said the duke. "Be not amazed at my sudden appearance. How fares San Severino?"

"He has been seized with a sudden and most dangerous colic," replied the castellan, gravely.

"He must recover, Crivello, — hear you, he must recover! We have promised his carcass to Zem to make sport with; we would not cheat the African out of his pastime. But strange words the king has spoken in hearing of a friend of mine," the duke continued, gloomily. "I tell you, Crivello, we have no time to lose! Vengeance speeds fast! We will take the monk from his tortures

and give him breath for awhile; perhaps he may prove more pliant and willing to execute our behests!"

Crivello stared at the duke, but spoke not.

"What ails you, captain? Have you seen a spectre in these dungeons?"

"Ay — a spectre I have seen, your Grace — and the monk has disappeared."

"The monk has disappeared?" echoed the duke, turning pale with rage. "Then you too have dared to disobey me?"

"Nay, my lord, I have not relaxed my watchfulness one moment since your Grace left the castle."

"And you have no inkling of the monk's opportunities?"

"I examined every crack and crevice in the wall; not a bat could escape! It is a miracle."

"It will be a miracle if you keep your head on your shoulders! What of the Moorish wanton?"

"She is dying fast; the air of the dungeons is very withering when one is young, and her thoughts eat into her. It would be an act of mercy to put her out of her misery," concluded the tender-hearted castellan.

"It cannot be the dungeon air, for Francesca lives," the duke replied, pensively, disregarding Crivello's suggestion.

"Ay, my lord, the lady Francesca hath some great hope to comfort her, though it is hardly something heavenly, since she laughs aloud when I bid her think of repentance."

"Lead me to the monk's dungeon, we will convince ourselves in person," the duke said, abruptly, and the castellan, though he crossed himself repeatedly, instantly obeyed and led the way to a subterranean cell at so great

a depth that all the light was lost, and the air smelled foul and rank, as in a sepulchre.

The duke entered the friar's dungeon alone, taking the lamp from the castellan and requesting him to wait outside. Even with the aid of the light, which shed a pale and sickly glimmer through the noisome air, it was some moments ere he could discern the objects in the interior of the cell. A block, a heavy chain, a rude bench were seen, but no human being, and the silence of death was broken only by the regular trickling of a drop of water which oozed through a crevice in the wall, and fell unceasingly with the same eternal monotony of splash. Listening for a few moments, and finding himself alone, the duke carefully traversed the chamber, and examined every stone, touching them with the hilt of his poniard, then he shook his head half incredulously, half in wonder, and slowly backed out, letting the door fall into the lock with such force that the metallic clang resounded ominously through the dark corridors. The castellan was waiting outside in the darkness, trembling with fear, for, while caring no more for a human life than that of a fly, Crivello had a marvellous dread of the powers of the nether world. The duke cast a fearful glance at his follower as he handed him the light, and they traversed in silence the dark corridor leading to the winding stairs.

"Crivello, this is some jeer of the fiend,—or you are a traitor!" Altamura said, at last, riveting his gaze upon the castellan's pale visage, then suddenly clutching him by the throat.

"My lord, as I live, I know not by what miracle he has escaped," gasped Crivello, endeavouring to free himself from the iron vice, when suddenly he threw up both hands and uttered a loud shriek.

The duke glared around with burning eyes, his fingers relaxing their hold around the Castellan's throat; he stared pale and speechless at the uncanny apparition which, apparently unconscious of not being alone, slowly advanced toward them, muttering and mumbling with strange gestures. A second look made even the duke commend his soul to the keeping of the saints, for in the bent and muffled figure he recognized none other than the black penitent; he wore a hooded cover over his head, and walked almost bent double, while his white beard, protruding from under the seemingly eyeless mask, seemed to sweep the ground.

Listening intently, the duke distinguished some words of his most dismal soliloquy, as he slowly approached, dragging his sandalled feet after him, his steps grating on the sandstone.

"Fiend, thou liest — for I believe! I believe and I pray but for a sign, that I may believe without doubting. Fate — destiny, — we cannot escape it, — if it came but a little faster; — I am not impatient, — if it came but a little faster! And then the end, — the end; darkness, — judgment, — eternity!"

"The sign has come, — awake, awake!" cried the duke, throwing the light of his lamp upon the magician, who seemingly without heeding the presence and interruption proceeded upon his way.

"I see the light of thy presence, — but not thy form," he gibbered. "Art thou an angel, or but the mocking fiend who heaps upon man's brains thoughts too heavy to be borne?"

"I am not an angel," replied the duke, calmly, "although women have called me so! But methinks thy memory will tell thee who I am."

"*Apaga Satanás!*" mumbled the penitent, in louder

tones. "I spat in thy face, — I dashed thee from me, — I cursed thy loveliness, — begone, begone!"

"A devil I may be, — but my loveliness is not seductive, — and even the devils are constrained to work the good purposes of heaven," said the duke, sedately. "Thou hast once prophesied great things of my future, — the time is at hand and thou art the one I have most fervently wished for."

The black penitent glared vacantly at the duke as he uttered these words, but hardly seemed to comprehend their meaning. He repeated them with a strange, wondering expression, as if vainly endeavouring to grasp the thought they conveyed. The duke patiently waited the result, while Crivello's frame shook in abject fear.

"I shall soon have use for thee," he continued, slowly, "for there will be work for both of us when Italy has a new king, — the West a new emperor! We shall make a new division, — the legacy of Theodosius has grown mouldy. And I swear to thee I will protect thee in thy labours, — this castle shall be thy retreat, and thou shalt work such miracles that the very pontiff thou shalt send to heaven shall cause thy name to be glorified for ever and ever — Amen!" the duke finished his speech, imitating the nasal chant of the clergy.

"Thou art the duke, then, — thou art Altamura," said the penitent, vacantly, "and is it thee I am to aid in this work?"

"Even so, wizard, or sorcerer, or both, — dost hear?" exclaimed the duke, impatiently.

"I hear," the penitent replied, but the question was not uncalled for, so statue-like was his countenance.

"Guelph and Ghibelline, — tiger and wolf couch not together! I tell thee there will shortly be an emperor in Rome," the duke continued. "Hast thou not thyself

conjured up the phantom before me,—hast thou not thyself denounced the archfiend and Antichrist?”

The effect of these words was so instantaneous that the revival of the wizard's slumbering intellect seemed almost miraculous.

“Who denies but damns himself,” he replied.

“Not I,” cried the duke, “for I have ventured upon a most perilous course to hasten the end, and verily the hour is nigh.”

The penitent's head sank again upon his breast, and he mumbled some unintelligible words.

“There is much at stake,” said the duke, with solemn emphasis. “Anjou will claim these fair lands, and the volcano must be prepared that will hurl him to his destiny ere he plant his foot in our Apulian strongholds. I must be lord and master, or betake myself for shelter—whither? Hardly the grave can yield it. Therefore I would have thee spread tidings of the events at hand among the superstitious populace,—thou understandest? And when the mighty avalanche has hurled the Hohenstaufens to their tomb,—when I am master, thou shalt have thine own sway to do as thy barefoot fancies lead thee. Nay,—I have such a miracle in store for thee as shall persuade the most incredulous that thine errand comes from above.”

“What? A miracle? More miracles? There are some things more miraculous than those the vulgar call so,” said the penitent, after a moment's hesitation.

“I will tell thee,” the duke spoke, in an undertone. “When the crisis is at hand the king will give a parting feast. Thou shalt appear at it quite as extempo, as the prophet of Israel at the Assyrian banquet,—thou shalt accuse the king of having foully slain sire and brother; in proof of his crimes and thy mission thou shalt invoke

the sudden vengeance of Heaven on the head of him and his adherents. And thereupon I tell thee, not one whom ever Altamura frowned upon will leave the feast alive."

"Misfortune makes men doubt! How is this miracle to come to pass?" said the black penitent, after a brief pause.

"Thou wilt deceive none! Hast thou not interest enough in heaven to turn thy curses into lightnings?"

"I doubt it," replied the penitent, "since thou standest before me unblasted. Thou seest I dissemble not."

"Neither will I. Listen, then! Two Moorish dames of such rare beauty as to make the very fiend covetous of their society have assisted me in bottling some rare wines," said the duke, tranquilly folding his arms.

"But fearest thou not that chance may for once be guided by an angel and pour the draught into thine own chalice?" replied the magician, with a dark glance upward.

"The butlers are my true servants, and the precious wines reserved for my friends are all distinguished by an infallible token," replied the duke, laughing, yet with some irritation at the bare supposition of so gross a blunder.

"But to call down a miracle, and none to follow,—what manner of saint were I then?" said the penitent, after another pause of profound rumination.

"Dost thou doubt?" the duke exclaimed, impatiently.

"Duke—I understand thee! But thou art certain that the poison is deadly, tasteless, and indiscernible?"

A terrible smile lingered on Altamura's lips.

"I am tired of these Plutonian sisters, whose direful practices, against which the very watchfulness of a Cerberus were in vain, may some day return upon the user.

And truly, if they who mingled the draught partake of it unwittingly — were that proof enough?"

"Proof enough — and justice! Thou wilt release them from their earthly prison-house?"

"Even so, and from their time-withered carcasses."

"I recognize the sign! Ha! Ye shapes and phantoms — mock me not! Glare not at me with your leer-ing scowl, — I recognize the sign!" exclaimed the magician, with such enthusiasm that it at once aroused the suspicions of the ever wakeful duke.

"Yet — mark me well," he said. "Thou hast the hospitality of this princely abode, but thou wilt be closely watched by one who knows how to use what he has in his hand."

"Thou hast said I am a magician, but it seems thou hast no faith in thine own belief," replied the penitent, hoarsely.

"Be it even so, — beware!"

With these words the duke raised his hand as if in warning, and, departing with Crivello in the gloom of the vaulted archways, left the black penitent to himself. With strange mutterings and with shuffling steps the adept of the black arts continued upon his way and vanished in the dread shadows of the corridors.

CHAPTER XI.

CONSPIRACIES

It was about daybreak, and the Duke of Altamura was escorting two muffled strangers in Spanish garb over a back stairway of his dark and dismal palace. The passage seemed only used by himself, for he locked all the doors as he returned from his office of civility, and concealed the last key behind an old suit of armour hanging on the wall. Then he rang a little bell, apparently a signal, for Crivello immediately appeared. He bore a most gloomy and fretful visage.

“Ha, now! What says my lady-love? By the three fates, you have the most vinegarlike aspect that ever love’s messenger wore. But I know it is a new entreaty for my presence,” said the duke, with a gaiety which the castellan of the Torre del Diavolo thought strangely out of season.

“I see it by that writhing in your face which in your vocabulary is called a smile,” the duke continued. “But no, Crivello, — I shall refuse! She will be better pleased if I appear jealous, — therefore, mark you, — I am jealous! I will not see her, — I will not come till fear for her life vanquishes every other consideration.”

“Signor, methinks it were to your advantage if neither love nor hate brought you near her again, even if she were still in the dungeon wherein we placed her, for she has escaped, — so has the black penitent.”

"By the foul fiend, — what say you? Escaped — escaped? When? How? By what conveyance? And the black penitent, — the wizard, likewise? Speak, man, speak, or must I choke the words from your damned Spanish throat?"

"I have always told you it brings a curse upon all our enterprises your Grace having a nun for a paramour," replied the castellan, doggedly.

"Escaped — escaped?" the duke reiterated, as if all his thoughts dwelt on this one point. "But no, — 'tis impossible! You have seen spectres, — the evil imaginings of your overtaxed sensibilities!"

"I have seen neither spectre nor living things, — the doors of the cell were open and the cell was empty."

The duke's doubt as to the sanity of the castellan seemed gradually to vanish before his determined statement.

"You are somewhat bolder than your wont," he said, with slow emphasis, "a good straw to show whence the wind blows. And the magician gone, too, and just when I would give a thousand crowns to see him again. The council meets to-day, and there will be ample business ere nightfall, — my strangler may arrive at any hour, — shall I let them see me stand agape and — no! She will return! Mark my words, Crivello, she will return. Betake yourself at once to the Torre, and let Argus with his hundred eyes be as a blind mole compared to your vigilance. We shall know more anon."

"No diligence shall be lost, my lord," Crivello replied, "for already men prattle boldly enough of our affairs."

"Look here, my worthy castellan, if any one has a witty attack in your presence, you will have his tongue slit in token of recognition, — and now begone!"

The castellan had no sooner departed than the duke

turned to his companion, who had hitherto remained in the background.

"Thou starest as pale and haggard as if thou hadst caroused with the fiend!" The duke turned with a diabolical smile to Reinald Aquino, Count of Caserta.

"He were fit society for such an one as I," Caserta replied, seating himself opposite the duke. "How guileless her bearing, — surely guilt forged never such a mask! No shadow of deceit hovered around her pure white brow, and her deep concern at my altered state, — falsehood has no such accents. Could I but have speech with that meddling villain, — my vision was obscured, my brain on fire, — I was easily persuaded, I saw what I was told to see!" He paused, covering his face with his hands.

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

"If thou hast no cause against the king, if thou preferrest thy present state of gilded bondage, — we want no forced allies. If thou mistrustest the testimony of thine own eyes, Caserta, who dare presume to counsel? The wiles of women are great. Thou knowest Pietro della Vigne's fate, and he was the emperor's bosom friend. Incest runs in the blood, — yet, — I have said nothing."

Caserta started up as if stung by a serpent.

"I am an Apulian, but I am Manfred's kinsman, Violanthe's husband — bide thou thy time!"

"I will not urge thee on, Caserta. Thou wilt be one of us sooner or later. Thou art an Apulian; even though the dupe of royalty. I have despatched messengers through Calabria and Terra di Lavoro, — every moment is fraught with destiny. The beggar monks, the filthy apostles of Anjou, are even now sowing the wind that shall breed the hurricane. Every baron in this land is pledged to our cause, and when the thunder-clouds, whose

distant rumbling thou hearest beneath the horizon, rise above its surface, the fury of the elements will sweep the Hohenstaufen empire into night and oblivion."

"The people love Manfred," Caserta replied, absently.

"The people! A plague upon the rabble! They gloat over whatsoever tickles their noisome palates; they shriek for whosoever satisfies their low desires, and their idol of to-day is their scorn of to-morrow. Slaves to their passions they shall obey,—their love I scorn!"

"Can we rely on John the Moor?" Caserta interposed.

"Weighing his treachery 'gainst a talent of gold, we may trust him for the difference! He will deliver Lucera into our hands."

A significant gesture conveyed the duke's meaning to Caserta's entire satisfaction, for he nodded approval.

"But now, ere we part, one word, Thomas Aquino. Events are hastening and heaven itself has decreed Manfred's destruction; heaven itself has struck him with blindness. Within an hour the council convenes,—wilt thou be one of us, Caserta?"

"No more!" the Apulian returned, fiercely. "I like not ranting knaves, whose empty boasts would not stir a snowflake from its icy Alpine pinnacle. Let thy request wait the hour!"

Ere the duke could make reply, Reinald Aquino, Count of Caserta, had without a word of farewell left the chamber, and for a moment Altamura's gaze burnt fiercely upon his retreating form.

"Thou shalt be convinced to thy heart's content," he muttered, after the Apulian's steps had died away. "But woe betide thee in thy new converted state, Thomas Aquino!"

And purposely delaying until he knew the council had assembled, the Duke of Altamura made his appearance in the Sala Regia among the last of the personages of any consequence.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MIDNIGHT CITATION

It was drawing toward sunset.

Ottorino had spent the greater part of the day in his apartments at the Moorish palace of Khalesa, whither he had been conveyed during his slumbers, after his wounds had been pronounced in a fair way toward healing. Brooding and ruminating over Helena's probable share in the dastardly attempt upon his life, and over the revelations which the days spent under Altamura's roof had brought to light, as well as over the Dominican's strange persistence and the absence of the duke from the sick-chamber, he was in a most unsociable mood. Just then Canaletto entered his apartment apparently sober, and with a meaning smile informed his master that a woman, to all appearances young, but closely veiled, requested an interview. Ottorino, being in no mood for such surprises, sternly rebuked Canaletto's leer, ordering him to retire and to admit the visitor.

A female form, enveloped in a dark Venetian mantle, glided into the chamber, and the Lombard's surprise knew no bounds when, as she lifted the veil, he beheld a visage whose fixed pallor, anguish, and determination recalled that of the Goddess of Destiny on the piazza, while her matchless form bore such likeness to that of Helena di Miraval that, had he not seen her face, he

would have wagered life and all on the certainty of beholding the kinswoman of the duke.

"Pardon me, noble Lombard," she said, "and if my blood in your eyes seems to have lost all its woman's tints for this intrusion, my purpose will at least clear the dismal queen of a sepulchre from the one and only stain she is not guilty of. Have you seen me before, Ottorino Visconti?"

"If my eyes do not belie me, I see before me the impersonation of the Goddess of Destiny, who spoke strange words to me in passing," the Lombard faltered, while motioning his visitor to an ottoman, at the very edge of which she sat down, resting her head on her arms.

"Was that the only time?" she questioned further. Ottorino doubtfully shook his head. "I remember no other, — yet it may have been possible."

"You remember the fairy, that lascivious apparition?"

"The fairy? The Fata Morgana?" the Lombard exclaimed, springing to his feet. "You! — and it was not — but no, no — I am dreaming — it cannot be!"

"It is! I took the shameless part at the behest of another, to darken the fame of the woman you loved, knowing that no Visconti will mingle his regal blood with that of a wanton. Ha! You stagger, — you stare? Knight, there is vengeance, vengeance for all, — no, not for all," she continued, with a sudden, terrific expression. "No, — not for all. He has wronged me beyond all vengeance, — but for you, — are you still in a mood to acquire the knowledge which has been denied you?"

"I am," Ottorino replied, with fixed determination, "at any cost and every risk."

"Are you equally resolved to ascertain the guilt or innocence of her to whom your heart, though writhing in agony, returns ever and ever as to its inexorable fate?"

"Woman, whoever you are, what know you of her — of me?" Ottorino exclaimed, convulsed with strange feelings.

"Much — much, which a strange, a marvellous man has revealed to me."

"A Dominican?"

"A saint!"

"Or a demon, permitted to wear that form in order to tempt the whole race of mankind to a fall more fearful than the first."

"We wander from our subject. For some foul scheme which he refused to execute, the duke imprisoned the monk in the foulest dungeon of his castle, but a miracle has happened: the monk is free."

"Marvellous indeed! Perchance to seek out his fair penitent, to shake her soul with the terror of his denunciation?"

"Patience, good knight, — bridle your haste! You are in search of the truth, — and truth you shall have until you shall yourself cry, 'Enough!'"

"Tell me this, then: Does Helena di Miraval love?"

"Helena di Miraval loves! She loves with such madness that her passions will hurl her headlong to destruction, and with her the object of her worship."

"Tell me but this, to teach my soul patience and forbearance — who is the favoured one?"

A shrill laugh broke from the lips of the Lombard's mysterious visitor, who regarded him as if she doubted his sanity.

"The favoured one!" she exclaimed. "Your rival is — the duke!"

Ottorino staggered as if he had been dealt a mighty blow. His hand went to his forehead, and his face grew

pale as death. For a moment his fair visitor feasted her eyes on his speechless dismay, then she continued:

"Patience, knight, — patience! I know a dread magician who has promised some direful revelations. We all know your double purpose here, — and if you have but the courage you shall behold — Enrico's slayer!"

"What know you of me?" faltered the Lombard.

She waved her hand impatiently.

"I came not hither to pry into your secrets, knight! None but the dead can reveal the mysteries of the dead. You shall learn all if you have the courage, — a courage which I, a woman, possess."

"Again — what is your behest? The presence of death, — certainty, — I long but for one conviction," Ottorino replied, with a shudder.

"To learn her share in that dismal tragedy? Have you ever heard of that unearthly magician, Dom Alamo, one who has trod this earth since the Saviour has walked it?"

"I have heard that there is a great reward proclaimed for him," replied Ottorino.

"At the duke's behest, to conjure up some unbidden guest, to compel to utterance the dread silence of the grave. Now to-night, if you have the courage, you shall behold the murderer in the presence of his victim and hear him reveal the depths of his black soul in the horrors of his fear and deprecation."

"Can the grave be compelled to yield up its fearful inhabitants?" questioned Ottorino.

"If the spell fails, his conscience will raise the spectres. And other listeners than the demons will hear the truth from those lips that least of all would utter it."

"And where is this mystery to be enacted?"

"There is a cave under Monte Pellegrino, held even in antiquity as an entrance to Tartarus. The fiends

stalk visibly through its labyrinths, howling their sufferings to the enduring rocks. Resolve, Lombard, — and quickly! For I must return to my place of anguish like the doomed phantom when dawn steals over churchyard graves. If you want to set your soul at rest for ever, speak, and I will meet you at the marble gate disguised as a nun."

Urged by the desire that consumed his soul, Ottorino pledged himself to meet his mysterious visitor at the appointed spot. A glare rather than a smile lit up Francesca's features, and with a mute greeting she departed, gliding noiselessly from the apartment.

The discovery that he had been deceived in the supposed identity of Helena and the fairy would have elated Ottorino beyond bounds, had he not been overwhelmed by the terrible intelligence concerning his rival. There was much in the statement to convince him of its truth, which explained what had hitherto seemed unaccountable. But while with frantic eagerness he snatched the one weak straw that might restore the peace which had gone from his soul, a dark suspicion entered almost simultaneously. Might not, with all her motives of vengeance, Francesca di Lesina be but the instrument of the duke, employed to trap him to his destruction? But Ottorino could not bring himself to believe in such black treachery. When the hour had come, he hastened with all possible speed to the place of appointment, where he encountered a woman enveloped in the habit of a nun. By a signal agreed upon he knew her to be the lady of the Torre del Diavolo.

They passed in silence through the gates, and, leaving the blooming vale of the Oreto to the left, proceeded quickly over fragrant meadows. The antique basilica

of Santa Onofria soon came in sight, and the remote swell of monkish chants was fitfully audible on the changes of the wind. But instead of following the beaten track by the church, they turned off over a wild, irregular heath, diversified by deep hollows and tall clumps of bramble and juniper bushes. Descending one of these little dells, which seemed as if excavated in the sandy soil at some remote period, they arrived in front of the towering mountain which stretched like a giant sarcophagus at the edge of the flowery vale. Before it there appeared a narrow entrance to two or three grottoes hewn in the rock, half-choked with weeds and fallen fragments.

Into one of these grottoes Francesca glided, but Ottorino involuntarily hesitated. The tales he had heard of the extent and intricacy of these caverns and their dangerous inhabitants recurred to him. But while he paused the click of two flints was audible, and by the accompanying flashes he discerned Francesca on her knees blowing some dry leaves into flame and kindling a torch. Ashamed of his fears and animated by the recollections which came upon him, Ottorino advanced into the grotto to light the torch. Francesca then rose and said, with a melancholy smile:

“How now beats your heart? Dare you follow me?”

“Ay,—and if it were over black snakes,” Ottorino replied; yet he hesitated again, for the torch but dubiously illumined the gloom into which they were penetrating, and which seemed to grow denser and thicker with every step they advanced. The passage was scarcely wide enough to permit the stretching of the arm, and was unevenly walled with chalk and sand. Proceeding in silence and with rapidity, they soon found themselves near a cavernous excavation, from which radiated three narrow galleries, one of which descended in an inclined plane to a

great depth below. The woman spoke scarcely a word, but occasionally she raised the torch as she advanced, at times revealing dark openings where one gallery was crossed by another.

The dense tomblike scent of the air began to exercise a chilling influence over the Lombard, and the frequent crumbling of sand and rock on their way, awakening dismal and seemingly supernatural sounds in the remote echoes, as if the phantoms protested against the intrusion of life, did not fail to exert their spell over him. Ever and anon pieces of sandy rock detached themselves, as if some malicious demon was attempting to crush the intruders; spectral cries multiplied to an infinite distance until they died in faint and mysterious whispers.

The Lombard began to be at once surprised and alarmed at the distance which they had traversed, when suddenly his guide paused, turning upon him with the full light of her eyes and torch.

"Your brow is damp, knight," she said, almost with a tinge of contempt in her tone. "If your heart fail you, return, for we are now entering the place of ordeal, and you must remain alone and without light in these solitudes until the actors in the dismal pageantry arrive."

"Be the hazard what it may, — I am here to run it," replied the Lombard.

"Let us on, then!" said Francesca, continuing her advance. The gallery gradually widened until it branched off on each side of an arch hewn in the rock. The arch opened into a cavern, a huge chaotic chamber, with immeasurable galleries opening into a common centre. The white sand on the ground seemed to have been strewn for ghosts to glide noiselessly over.

"It is a fearful theatre, fit to stage a more fearful drama," said Francesca, exhibiting the interior of the

cavern as far as her torch could illumine its vast recesses; then she continued, in an undertone:

"If legends lie not, more murdered and mangled victims have found here their sepulchre than we would dare to surmise. Hither come sorcerers and witches to desecrate the silence with their black sabbat, and hither will the duke come, a spirit even as dark. But to see all unseen,—have you the courage to hide yourself in yonder niche over the arched entrance, whence your retreat, when the dark hour has passed, will be easy and assured?"

"Is it a sepulchre?" asked the Lombard, with a shudder.

"What if it be?" returned Francesca. "What can we fear in death that we have not suffered in life? But Time shall not weary you much with his company until I return. Yonder passage leads by a few windings to the chapel, where the duke and his sorcerers are to meet, and they wait but a preconcerted signal from me."

"Time?" said Ottorino, still hesitating. "Wherefore should he enter this abode of the dead?"

"To bid them be patient."

"This immense silence perchance answers the question," said the Lombard, after a pause, for even his courage faltered at the thought of remaining alone in these fearful solitudes. But the violence of his feelings revived his determination, yet again the apprehension of treachery rushed so forcibly into his mind that he paused and turned to Francesca with a look so expressive of his suspicions that she understood him without words.

"Betray you—and wherefore?" she exclaimed, impatiently. "You will hold light the oath of one of my kind; yet, may this whole mountain fall over and crush me through all eternity if I wish you aught but good."

This last dreadful imprecation silenced Ottorino's scruples, and he entered the niche from which he was to watch the fearful proceedings.

It had apparently been excavated at a remote period, but if it had ever served any other purpose, nothing remained but the darkness of the sepulchre. The Lombard entered backward, for it would have been difficult to turn in so narrow a space. He retreated some distance from the entrance, until Francesca was satisfied that it was not possible to discover him from the floor of the cavern. Then waving her hand in farewell, with an expression of triumph kindling in her eyes, she hastened from the cavern by one of the galleries on the opposite side. Ottorino bent forward and watched the last glimmer of light disappear. It was succeeded by utter darkness and a silence as unbroken as if sound were annihilated.

Abandoned thus to his meditations, the Lombard's thoughts returned to muse with such anguish on the events transacting above ground, that for some time he even forgot his present situation and peril. Here, in the solitude of darkness and death, he was bound to confess to himself that he loved Helena di Miraval dearer than life. The rumour, if based on truth, that the duke was his rival, explained much that had been dark to him. But it threw no light on her strange impassiveness, behind which might lurk the purpose to cast off the toy after it had satisfied her vanity. On the other hand, it accounted for the duke's watchfulness, which made approach to her presence well-nigh impossible; it accounted for his unanswered messages and her strange demeanour, so full of contradictions. But the poison which the Dominican had instilled into him still rankled in his

veins, and, while he hovered between fear and hope, his anxiety grew more terrible every moment.

Suddenly a light gleamed down a gallery, voices were echoed in whispers down the walls, some time ere the speakers appeared. And when they did enter, their aspect was not calculated to dispel the sinister gloom of the solitudes which they disturbed.

The foremost was a person enveloped in a long black mantle, wearing a mask with a plumed hat slouched over it. Another followed who was garbed like a Spanish man-at-arms, his visage shaded by the long tattered hair which hung from under his morion. A third came, holding a torch and apparently directing the advance of the first two by the light. He was an aged man, to judge by his stoop and his dragging gait, but he was too completely enveloped in the garb of a black penitent to be more closely scrutinized. He leaned upon a long black wand, curiously inlaid with figures and stars, and carried over his shoulders a scarlet sack, which probably contained some of the implements of his art.

"Methinks this ancient air is wondrous musty, Dom Alamo, yet it should be dry and warm, since we must have descended almost as deep as hell," said the foremost, whose tone of mock gaiety revealed him to be the Duke of Altamura. "How much deeper must we plunge ere the fiends are near enough to hear our evocations?"

"Signor, this place will serve the purpose if we can make the circle wide enough," replied the necromancer. "But I must have assistance, and I will summon two wise sisters of the art; we are ever willing to do each other turns of aid and kindness."

Slightly withdrawing from his companions, Dom Alamo drew a sharp, blue gleaming knife from his bundle, pricked himself in the arm, and advanced toward

a remote gallery in front, sprinkling little drops of his blood as he went, and uttering some strange words with great rapidity in a raised tone, as if calling to some one at a distance. Numerous discordant and gibbering echoes answered, and suddenly there was heard a violent whirr of wind; after a pause, during which it increased, two haggard old women apparently blew down the gallery and entered, with their robes heaped about them, shrieking, "We come — we come!"

"Leave mumbling to your saints, Crivello, or perchance you will mar our spell," said the duke, impatiently. "Look, man, they are your old friends, the witches."

The sorceresses, greeting the duke with a fantastic bend, pointed their skinny fingers at the trembling castellan, and mewed and laughed in concord.

"The devil may not affright you, old hags, being your daily and nightly company," said the Catalan, angrily. "But if I had my way, you would not laugh so loud after the recent prank of your mad offspring."

"Peace, fool! The reverend mothers were in the same kettle with us, but the thrice-damned Lombard may live to rue the day when he turned protector of harlots," exclaimed the duke, fiercely. "And now, most potent magician, since thy weird helpmates are here, — why dost thou pause and stare at me?"

"Signor, — I would clearly understand your will, which as yet was but a doubtful hint," replied the wizard.

"Thou hast the power to raise the dead, for hast thou not shown me Charlemagne in thy magic mirror?" said the duke, after an unusual pause of hesitation. "But now I would have thee summon a spirit which will not need so powerful a spell, for it is still restlessly wandering in the shadowy realms of eternity. Whatever, or where it

be, — I would learn how it can find rest in the grave, cease darkening my sunshine and thwarting my resolves.”

“What spirit wouldst thou have me summon?” replied the necromancer. “Over the blessed my spells have no power, and some of the damned are below the citation which compels the fiends from hell.”

“The blessed, — nay! I have nothing to do with saints! Make thy circles and utter thy spells, and I will tell thee anon whom I would behold.”

The necromancer took his staff and made some mystic signs at three points of the cavern, muttering to himself in some unknown language; he then threw it forward. It stuck quivering in the sand, and to the affrighted eyes of the gazers for some instants it resembled a fiery serpent, coiling and hissing over the spot.

The magician advanced, and, taking his staff as the centre, drew a circle around it, partly linked, in which he drew another of greater extent with a pentacle in the midst, and a third of similar size as the first. He then commanded the assistant hags to trench the circles by casting up the sand with little brass shovels which they had brought. They did this, all the time pronouncing in shrill voice some cabalistic words; then they set to work with great zeal and evident expectations of some portentous results, exchanging mysterious nods of satisfaction, while the magician placed numerous bones and fragments of skulls around the second circle.

“And now, signor, tell me if the spirit we are to summon was violently expelled from its carcass, and, if so, when and where?” said the magician.

“What matters it to thee?” retorted the duke, much agitated. “Why this question?”

“To make the circle of a capacity to withstand the

wrath of the spirit, which else might tear the questioner to pieces, or blast him with fire from hell."

"Hell's vassals, then, are as rebellious as those of earthly rulers," said the duke, smiling darkly. "A violent death — ay! And so indeed it was, — but these good dames here can tell thee how the golden-haired youth — the emperor's son — ended."

"He had dishonoured the pure blood of Moorish princes, pure since Omar the Caliph," hissed the older of the sisters, fiercely tossing back her matted gray hair as she glared up from her toils, while her companion also paused, and, looking up with a sardonic smile, said:

"Ah! But she was so beautiful."

"But why slain?" asked the magician. "Thou, my lord, didst not strike to avenge the blood of the prophet!"

"He had to die some way," the duke replied. "The brood cannot endure for ever."

The necromancer's eyes gleamed fearfully through the holes of his black hood, and he resumed his labours, muttering:

"We must weave the spell thrice, for the injured have a power of which their assailants dream not."

Not a word of this strange converse had escaped the ears of the Lombard, who remained in his hiding-place motionless as a statue.

While the hags delved a second trench around the circle, the necromancer placed a low tripod in the first. Upon this he set a brass kettle, then kindled a fire beneath it, and from the herbs which the witches had brought, and many others in his own sack, selected the materials for a fumigation.

The duke continued for some time apparently engaged in scanning his sepulchral surroundings.

"Thy ghosts are like women, Dom Alamo," he at last

said, with wild levity. "They will not come when asked, and when not wanted they are with you."

"I have not yet uttered my spell, but the time is at hand. Sisters, sit in the first circle and repeat the name I pronounce — but wherefore trembles the soldier? Only to his murderer the spirit will appear."

"We all had a share in the work — let us all behold it! I hate the Christian still!" said one of the Moorish hags.

"Why, — and so do I! I hate him and I fear him not; let him come, — let him come! I slew him, by the eternal God, and I do not quiver in a nerve," exclaimed the duke, in a frenzy.

"Beware, then, that thou hast uttered no prayer, else we are all at the mercy of the fiends," said the magician, gazing at the pallid castellan of the Torre del Diavolo, whose teeth chattered audibly.

"Enter the circle if thou wouldst be safe, and fear not until thine hour has come! Duke, thy station is within the pentacle of the second circle!" .

Crivello mechanically obeyed the directions of the sorcerer, while the duke boldly advanced and, leaping into the pentacle, stood with folded arms in a resolved or, perhaps, skeptical attitude. The sage then returned to the foremost circle, which he occupied alone. He knelt and took a curious volume of Oriental manuscript, illuminated with magic figures and signs, from his breast, then, taking the only torch which they had brought, he thrust it into the sand and extinguished it. The little light which remained was furnished by the livid flames which burned under the magician's copper vessel, and from which Ottorino perceived a thick, dark smoke arising, full of strange fumes. Filled with horror and fascination, he anticipated the apparition of an inhabitant of the

vast unknown. But despite the horror which the duke's crimes excited, there was something almost sublime in the fixed and unquailing courage with which he seemed to await the issue of the terrific experiment.

"Let it take some form,—any but that of darkness, and I will not fear it."

"Silence—silence!" the magician commanded, angrily. "The sisters give not the proper responses, for they hear not my words," and he continued to read from his book in a language unknown to all save himself and the hags.

And soon strange rumblings were heard in the cavernous depths below, as of thunder rolling through remote galleries and approaching nearer and nearer. Fiery hieroglyphics ran along the sandy earth and the sepulchral walls of the cavern. The necromancer calmly read on, without raising his eyes, and the witches continued their chant in mingled terror and enthusiasm, until it rose like the shrieks of the damned over the thunder of judgment. Suddenly the brazier began to sparkle and to hiss, and seemed to bubble over with coloured serpents and lurid flames. A deadly mephitic odour filled the cavern, which produced a strange and swooning languor on Ottorino, although he was removed from its immediate action. The feeling was brief, but it left a kind of dreamy intoxication of the senses, so that, when raising his eyes from the group, he saw what seemed to be legions of hideous spectres and demons of the most grotesque and horrible forms crowding into the cavern and flitting up and down the walls.

"It is in vain,—they spurn my offerings," muttered the magician, in a low tone.

"Surely we lack some potent ingredient," replied one of the witches.

"More mandragora! Hark,—how it shrieks," said the necromancer, hurriedly. "The sweat of a murderer's right hand in the flames! If these are spirits, we have more powerful spells to evoke them! Speak, duke! Remind them of all thy direst deeds of midnight, by which thou hast merited their support and favour. Speak,—or I have no longer power to detain them or to compel submission."

"By the evil passions that consume my soul, by the spouse of Christ whom I raped from his altars, by the dying curses of the victims of the blackest midnight,—by the blood of Enrico," exclaimed the duke, and, observing that the spectral hosts gradually waned away, he added, more frantically:

"Hear me, demons, spirits, or whatever you are! By the damning calumnies I have uttered against ye, let the spirit I demand appear before me!"

A moment of profound and awful silence followed, and then a universal shriek arose from all the gazers save alone the duke, who stood fixed and immobile as a figure carved in ebony, for a pale and ghastly blue light gleamed down the gallery on the opposite wall of the cavern, and in it appeared a darkness whose presence froze the very life-blood in the beholder's veins. And yet there was no precise outline of form or features,—vague hues of armour, a mantle and rich surcoat stained with gore and the green ooze of corruption, some ghastly indistinctness of a visage and waving plumes, was all that was discernible.

"Demon or angel,—whatever thou art," gasped the duke, at length, when the necromancer glared as if petrified at the horror he had himself evoked, and Crivello sank senseless in the sand. "Yea,—it is he, it is he, —even as we left him! Enrico, Enrico — speak!" he

cried, in the tones of a madman. "Speak, or must my soul burst in its silence? Speak! If for some dark crime thy soul cannot find rest, is it thy hell to make mine? Speak! What penance, what prayers can win thee rest and peace?"

There was a deep, sepulchral hush.

"Ferrando," replied a low, unearthly voice, which seemed to penetrate from the depths of the grave.

"I am here!" shrieked the duke, in a frenzy.

"Cast off thy robes of pomp, — renounce thy dream of empire, — resume the priestly habit thou hast abandoned for the vanities of earth, — wear out thy days in penance and prayers and forswear thy incestuous love, — refute the hideous calumnies thy villainy has spread to obscure a pure and innocent name, — and Heaven may yet have mercy!"

"Never — never — never! Arch-fiend, thou but assumest this shape to torture me!" raved the duke. "When I am lord of Italy, bid me redeem the holy sepulchre from the hands of the infidels, bid me endow sanctuaries for thine unpeacefully parted soul — nay, do thy worst! Destroy me if thou canst; I defy thee! Yea, — I will torture thee, too! When the crown of the Western empire sits on my brow, when Helena, she whom I love with a passion ravishing and boundless, — when Helena sits enthroned, my empress, beside me in the splendour of her unrivalled beauty, which thou hast coveted, when all the earth shouts, I care not whether in love or fear, — then come, then!"

But even as he concluded the speech with frantic defiance and exultation, the apparition disappeared, while a long, despairing wail resounded through the cavernous depths like a farewell cry to hope.

The dead, red light in the brazier now reappeared,

which the supernatural glare had darkened, and Ottorino, almost bereft of his senses from the effect of the terror, felt that a long silence ensued.

"Light! Light!" thundered the duke. "Didst thou hear, Dom Alamo, what the devil said? Light, I tell thee — light!"

"My spell could never raise that spirit," the necromancer said, gasping. "Save thy soul from the burning grasp that is upon it, — repent! For thou hast seen a spirit, whether sent by heaven or hell I know not which, — but a spirit."

"I am beholden to thee for thy good advice, Dom Alamo," shrieked the duke, with a wild laugh. "Repent, — recant, — turn monk and mumblor of masses, — hast thou forgotten the phantom thou hast conjured up in days gone by, the phantom which has haunted my waking hours and dreams?"

"I have not," gasped the magician.

"Then thou art answered! Yet, once more let me tax the powers of thy mighty art! Command the spirits to show me the likeness of him Helena loves, — or shall love, — that in obeying their behest the midnight steel may not mistake the bridegroom."

"It is in vain; — the fiends are weary and will no longer obey my spell!" said the necromancer, drawing himself up slowly and gazing around with convulsive shudders.

"I say they will, — they shall! Pronounce thy words — I will echo thee," returned the duke, with mad velocity. "Ask, if it be the Lombard, — but no, no! It may not be."

"Urge me not to the task! I tell thee, the fiends are weary! The reluctant spirits will but obey to words that will shake the very mountain above us."

"Shake the whole universe if thou wilt, but let my soul be satisfied," ejaculated the duke.

"Back to thy pentacle, or the fiends will seize the instant to tear thy heart out," cried the magician, as the duke strode eagerly forward. "I will do what I may, but they will not listen to me."

The duke obeyed, wiping with both hands the cold perspiration from his brow, and the necromancer resumed his spell, but with seeming feebleness and reluctance. The duke's agonizing anxiety was now amply shared by Ottorino. In his eagerness he forgot every restraint of prudence, and stepped altogether out of his concealment. It is true that the cavern was in almost complete darkness, for the brazier threw only a narrow circular light around its tripod, revealing the bending figure of the sorcerer, and touching the edges of the duke's garments and the tips of his plume with fiery red.

But most unluckily and suddenly a bright light shot up from the brazier, casting a strong reflection on the mailed figure of the knight. The Moorish hags, who had turned their heads in terror from the spectral presence, beheld him and uttered a simultaneous shriek. The duke and the necromancer both turned around and clearly discerned him for an instant ere he precipitately retreated. Ottorino remembered afterward that the duke nodded to him in sarcastic recognition, while the necromancer, uttering a groan of exquisite anguish, sank to earth.

An instant's intent listening convinced Ottorino that no suspicion of his bodily presence had crossed the fear-struck imagination of the spectators. The duke stepped from his pentacle into the magician's circle, and raised the necromancer with an exclamation which sounded more like contempt than pity. Then he burst into a

frantic peal of laughter, which rang far and near through the galleries, kicked over the brazier and, extinguishing the last gleam of light, precipitately strode ahead of the whole evil company which trooped off in his train.

It was not until the last echo of their footsteps had died away and silence had for some time succeeded that Ottorino recovered from the overwhelming confusion of his thoughts and remembered his own situation. Helena innocent of all the direful crimes imputed to her, — for a moment every atom of his soul was absorbed in the thrice-blessed conviction. The memory of their meeting at Favara almost overwhelmed him, and even the fearful certainty of the personality of his powerful rival had no terrors for him at this moment. For a brief space of time he laboured to persuade himself that all he had seen and heard was a dream, — a dream the wild, incongruous and horrible events which he had witnessed in so rapid a phantasmagoria. Then without awaiting Francesca's guiding hand he rushed from his concealment, but his progress was slow and perilous, and too late he repented of his daring impulse. In the midnight gloom, which in the absence of any light now filled the cavern, he could only proceed by carefully testing the ground with hand and foot, and after he had tediously groped his way through the darkness, filled with stagnant air and noisome vapours, he perceived in the extreme distance the faint glimmer of a light, and almost simultaneously he heard the barking of a dog.

Continuing his advance in the direction which promised the nearest outlet, he soon found himself at a jagged opening, not the one through which he had entered. Several groups of men were sleeping around a fire, while the dog, finding his efforts to arouse them useless, stood growling and glaring at the intruder.

Ottorino was about to call for assistance, when one of the sleepers raised his head and exclaimed in the fierce tones of the bandit chief of Calabria:

“Down, beast — down! The curse of St. Anthony be upon thee.”

The Visconti became at once aware that he had little favour to expect from the hands of this ruffian and his subordinates, some of whom were garbed as soldiers and peasants, and among whom were two or three deformed beggars, whom he remembered to have seen crawling about the streets and the steps of churches.

Nearly all these fellows were armed to the teeth with crossbows and daggers. Bucklers of steel and of bull's hide, which served as pillows, and fragments of roasted kid, egg-shells and chestnuts, together with several goat-skins of wine, attested the fact that they had not neglected their personal comfort. Ottorino endeavoured to persuade himself to patience, and, knowing how difficult it would be to pass to the entrance beyond the bandits' camp, he laboured to compose the direful agitation of his blood and spirits; but recollection came upon recollection, and the events of the last few hours, into which seemed crowded the thoughts and sufferings of years, rushed back upon him.

Deliberating upon the best plan of escaping the dog and the ruffians, his reverie was suddenly interrupted by voices below. The chief of the bandits had risen from his rough bed and was apparently commenting on the strange demeanour of the dog.

“I shall not take Cerbero with me, for some colony of rats might scent us in our absence.”

This was said to the bravo who occupied the straw next to him, and, far from being asleep, was sharpening a stiletto on his leather sandals. One by one the bravi rose,

almost a hundred in number. Adjusting their masks, they left the cavern, one treading in the footsteps of another. At last no one remained but the dog. He had made several ineffectual attempts to follow his brutal master, who had spurned him back, finally kicking him severely, to make him understand his pleasure. The animal at last submitted, and stood gazing long and wistfully after his master, as he went up a steep path with the bandits and disappeared behind a ledge of rock. The creature then began dejectedly to lick its flanks, occasionally pricking its ears, as if it still heard the distant footsteps.

In order not to attract the bravi by the barking of the dog, Ottorino waited until he reckoned that there was a sufficient distance between himself and the bandits, whose presence in the capital of the kingdom on the eve of the coronation was another mystery which baffled his understanding. Then, drawing his dagger, he fearlessly entered the cavern. His first movement startled the dog, and when it laid eyes on the intruder it gave a wild yell and sprang at Ottorino so fiercely that without weapon he would have been lost. But at the next moment the dog without a single howl or struggle fell to the ground, the weapon buried in its throat.

Through an entrance so completely choked with briars and bushes that only those familiar with the haunt perceived a way into it by crawling beneath the matted foliage, Ottorino gained the valley, just as the moon was going down behind the western hillsides. His heart was drunk with joy, and yet filled with even greater perturbation than before. For much remained dark to him that must be cleared up. But, first and foremost, — how was he to find audience with Helena?

After having reached his apartments at Khalesa, as Ottorino was unfastening his doublet, a scroll, carefully

tied and sealed, fell out. It had been placed under his belt with such care that only when the latter was entirely removed did its presence reveal itself. With trembling fingers he broke the seal, staring in incredulous bewilderment at the message it contained:

“Thy fate awaits thee at Favara, when the lamp of love burns in the skies.”

CHAPTER XIII.

AMOR VICTOR

NEVER were reflections more involved and perplexed than those with which Ottorino reviewed the circumstances of the extraordinary scene which he had witnessed. While the sum of his discoveries pointed to the duke alone, the recollection of Helena's fascination worked so powerfully in the soul of the Visconti that brighter hopes began to spread their light over the dark shadows of the past. At times Ottorino felt like crying out for joy, — at the next moment gloom and despair settled over him with the thought of Enrico's mysterious doom and the beautiful rival of the Moorish girl. Then the whirlwind of his thoughts rushed into other channels. The duke in his frenzy had revealed himself the author of the dismal tragedy; but his forced confession shed no light on his motives for a deed which, however in accord with his dire temper, pointed to the presence of a favoured and formidable rival. Despairingly Ottorino lost himself in the intricate labyrinth of intangible surmises, but as evening drew nigh fear diminished and hope rose in proportion.

It was verging into sunset when the Visconti found himself traversing the narrow vale of the Oretto on his way toward the groves of Favara. It needed even now all his resolution not to succumb to the influences of

conflicting thoughts and emotions. The rising moon and the languid sweetness of the hour joined in conspiracy against the too susceptible Lombard. The musical murmur of distant fountains, mingled with the notes of innumerable nightingales, the dreamy brightness of the moonlight, the soft, mysterious whisperings of the leaves in the gentle air, touched subtle chords of love and longing in his soul. But even with these warring impulses at work, his regret, his love, his anguish, and his wrath seemed to grow with every pace more wildly intense, until in the supervening agony he could without hesitation have yielded himself to any doom, however terrible, which would relieve his soul of the doubts which ate into it with poisoned fangs. Black thoughts were vaguely whirling in his disordered fancy, when he heard a slight rustling in the leaves by his side. Turning, a deadly pallor overspread his features as his eyes met those of Helena di Miraval. He had expected to behold her flushed in the triumph of her beauty, arrayed to dazzle and to subdue, but he had not armed himself against the simplicity of her black gown, totally unornamented, rendering more distinct the marble pallor of her beautiful face, which slowly tinted with faint rose-coloured hues, when she felt his gaze burning upon her. Her voice trembled with some consciousness, when, interrupting with a gesture at once dignified and agitated his confused and strangely humble salutation, she commanded the matron in the black habit of the cloister who had accompanied her to retire. Ottorino's gaze reverted in a tumult of passions from this personage, who revived memories of his former tryst and deception, to Helena; but he found that she was only intent on watching her companion disappear behind the Moorish kiosk.

"My duenna will await me yonder," the lady of Mira-

val then said, not without a slight significance in her tone and not without confusion, "to prevent any alarm or surprise, — but pray, signor, be seated."

She pointed to one of the marble benches interspersed at close intervals throughout the rose-thicket, taking her seat rather with the manner of a queen about to hear a suppliant than that of a woman supposed to have granted an interview to her lover. Ottorino, recovering from his first embarrassment, thanked the lady with a slight bend of the head, but preserved his station, though at a lesser distance.

There were several moments of utter and most embarrassing silence, and, but that his disbelieving, jealous heart suggested other causes, Ottorino could not but have been moved with the expression of melancholy and subdued agitation which her whole attitude revealed. As it was, he dared not trust his voice to speak, and it was Helena di Miraval whose tremulous siren tones broke the silence.

"Signor," she said, pausing after the first word with visible embarrassment, and then resuming with firmness and hauteur, "if I have requested this singular audience, it is because I would repay the gift of life bestowed on me by you, by requesting the acceptance on your part of the means of immediate flight which I have prepared."

Deeply touched as Ottorino was by this seemingly generous concern for his safety, the jealous suggestions which his fancy instantly mingled supported him in the carrying out of the part he had planned to enact.

"Even the fallen angels were not expelled from paradise so suddenly, lady, and such your presence makes Palermo and these leafy bowers, fraught with memories too dear to be forgotten," he replied, in a low, wooing tone, indescribably sweet to the senses of his listener. "Neither

were they condemned unheard,—and by whom am I accused, to merit punishment as severe as this?”

“Condemned unheard,” Helena replied, slowly; “truly our sex has been wrongfully chidden with want of consistency. But let it pass. You had a friend,—you cast her from you,—are you not therein answered?”

“It may have been my mishap not to understand her, to offend her,—but—who was at fault?” replied Ottorino, fixing his burning gaze upon the woman before him.

“You admit, then, signor,—it was a fault?”

“Again I request an accusation.”

“Does not your memory accuse you?” asked Helena, with a touch of deep indignation.

“My memory is only my own enemy, not yours,” Ottorino replied, falteringly.

She shook her head, while with her words she gradually lashed herself into the fire of anger.

“Your memory! Your memory! It is like the rippling wave that is swallowed by the next,—it is like the idle wind that dies at sunset,—if I were the woman you accuse me to be, how dare you trust yourself in my presence?”

“Because on my lips still lingers the ravening fire which Helena di Miraval left there in that never-to-be-forgotten night of the past. How could I fear that I was mortal, surviving the rapture of that moment?” Ottorino said, in tones which vibrated through the innermost depths of her soul, though shame and anger sparkled in her expression as she replied:

“Your flattery sounds like fear! You grievously misdoubted your mortality when you accused the nun who attended your wounds of attempting your life with poison! Oh, Madonna—your life! And yet with all these proofs,—but it matters not! To the purpose, then! Fly and

save yourself from the duke's anger, for it is deadly!" she concluded, shuddering.

"Why should I dread your kinsman's anger? Why should I fly? Why should I not rather follow the dictates of my heart and claim you as my own before the whole world, you, the only woman I have ever loved; you, the one I have never ceased to worship?"

"That I will answer you," returned Helena, with vivacity. "The pride of the Visconti is reported great, and you would not expose it to the mortification of a refusal, which by the most blessed Virgin awaits you if after this warning you dare to utter it."

Ottorino's first surprise was followed by an influx of jealous suspicion.

"Surely," he said, with rising vehemence, "it is for me to recall memory rather than for you. It must be some greater alliance fostered by policy or ambition that prompts your speech, for my questionings and doubts, daily provoked and yet unallayed, cannot have moved you to this anger. Fool that I was," he added, in a voice full of anguish and bitterness, "that I dreamed for a moment to be loved by Helena di Miraval!"

"Then you did believe — once?"

"I loved you."

"You loved me," she repeated, as from the depths of a dream. "Love trusts, — love believes, — love gives love in return. You loved me, — perhaps with the intoxication of the moment, with the feeling of gratified vanity that it was Helena di Miraval who trusted her heart to your keeping, that it was the proudest woman in the realm who had spoken words of love to Ottorino Visconti. Yes, — I loved you, too, but with a love different from yours; I did not doubt you, — even though it pleased you to create a pageant of your own in the

company of a Moorish wanton, — even though you were stirring up the foul corruption of the marshes in quest of proof of Helena di Miraval's guilt! I loved you, — once, — then! It is all over now."

A deadly pallor overspread Ottorino's features, and staggering as if he had received a blow from an unseen foe, he grasped his forehead with both hands.

"Pageant — Moorish wanton," he stammered, "which one of us is mad? Hath some fiend whispered this calumny into the ears of all Palermo?"

A disdainful gesture was Helena di Miraval's sole reply, as if the subterfuge was too threadbare to require verbal refutation, but this pretended or actual unbelief on her part drove the Visconti to a frenzy in which he no longer measured his speech.

"And it is you who chide me with a deed whose dark import a future hour will reveal to you!" he wildly exclaimed. "You, who bid me come to the convent of Santa Lucia but to feast your eyes on my dismay when, leaving the confessional, you passed me as one who had no claim on Helena di Miraval's heart! You upbraid my lack of faith, you, who lured me to the grottoes of Proserpina but to witness the triumph of a rival!"

"Triumph — confessional — rival?" stammered the lady of Miraval, scrutinizing Ottorino as if she feared that he had been struck with madness. "Surely this is some cheat of the fiend, else —"

He uttered a wild laugh, having worked himself up into a frenzy that made him utterly oblivious of his own resolves, but his mirth of despair died down with almost equal suddenness when he remarked the look of blank dismay with which Helena di Miraval regarded him.

"I have lived a prisoner in the duke's palace," she

said, in low and tremulous accents, "surrounded by spies and the dark agents of his intrigues. I never go to the convent, for my confessor comes to me. At the hour appointed my duenna awaited you at the cloister, — in vain, — and as for the apparition in the grotto, — I swear to you by all that can draw destruction on a broken vow that it was another of my sex, the same one who, as the Fata Morgana of the Carnival, mocked your faith to clouds and vapours! Oh, had you but heeded my warnings! Believe me, Helena di Miraval makes not light of love, and where she gives her heart there it remains for ever. Oh, had you but heeded my words, had you but trusted me! — even against the testimony of the whole world! Such a love would have been love indeed, and against such love and such faith the intrigues of all the fiends had been in vain."

In speechless amazement Ottorino stared at the woman before him. Her words carried such conviction that he could not question her sincerity; at the same time his dark suspicions of the duke's plotting and authorship of his miseries changed into certainties. There remained little doubt in his mind that the veiled apparition at the convent of Santa Lucia had with a purpose attracted him to herself, and as for the scene in the grottoes of Proserpina, doubt in the reality of his vision had time and again flashed through his mind, when his passion-inflamed brain had permitted saner thought to usurp frenzied suspicion.

At last he spoke, his gaze fixed upon the ground.

"Love trusts, — it oftener fears! What manner of man was I to think that I could compel the love of Helena di Miraval?"

He paused for a moment, raising his eyes to her face, as if to read its inmost thoughts. Her gaze was fixed

on the dark, velvety greensward, as if she dared not trust herself, while with hands convulsively clasped she listened to his words.

"But," Ottorino continued, after a pause, encouraged by her very passiveness, "if her words are true, if Helena di Miraval's heart ever remains where she has given it, if love indeed exchanges love and sells not its wares, — then love me with all the passion of your sex, as I love you with the love of mine!" And, sinking in a delirium of passion at her feet, he stammered, "My Helena, — perfection of all divinity in woman, you whom from the first moment I have never ceased to worship, — I love you dearer than my life, and when I thought you had attempted it, I loved you more than ever!"

And, snatching her hands, he covered them with burning kisses, while in vain she struggled to tear them away from him, her countenance bearing mingled traces of tenderness and indignation, which suddenly melted away in a shower of tears.

"Leave me, — leave me," she faltered, "fly, — save yourself!"

Vehemently as this outburst smote the conscience and heart of Ottorino, the very beauty of her confusion and tenderness roused his jealousy, his love, his regrets, in a furious whirlwind of passion, which threatened to sweep away the last restraint.

"Fly — fly? My veins flow fire, and the divine spell of your beauty has fettered my soul," he uttered, with frenzied fervour. "I love you, Helena, I love you as never woman was loved before! But speak! speak! — lest I think you are making mirth and mockery of my madness."

"No, Ottorino, no! Leave me! I swear to you by an oath, to break which is perdition, that I loved but

once, — and you!" faltered Helena, her fair face drooping like a rose too heavily laden with dew.

"Nay, then, if you loved me once, — if you loved me, and parting as you bid me to, for ever, — I will return that kiss, whose sweetness lurks like madness in my blood," exclaimed the Visconti, wildly, while Helena started away from him in terror, with difficulty eluding his frantic embrace.

"I love you in very truth, Ottorino — I loved you since your first glance of lofty pride fell upon me," she exclaimed, finding herself as instantly entangled in his arms. "Forgive me but this once, — swear to me that you will leave me, swear to me that you will give me back my madness, and all shall be as if it had never been!"

"Leave you — now?" exclaimed Ottorino, flinging her from his embrace, to which she was unconsciously yielding in mingled fear and tenderness. "Leave you, to find a fitter successor to Ottorino Visconti? But no, no, no! By the great God above, who hears us, and if all the fiends of doom were arrayed against me, — you are mine! Nay, you shall not force me from you, you shall listen to me, as I take heaven and earth to witness that I believe you against the angels."

"Against the angels?" she replied, with a sad smile. "And what miracle has brought about this sudden change? Ottorino, I loved you as I never loved, but your disdain, your doubts, have eaten into the very core of my heart, and even supernatural assurance would be to you no confirmation of my innocence."

"Then listen, my love! By some chance I found myself the victim of a black deceit, — an accident in itself as unaccountable as the revelations were fearful."

"What accident? What revelations?" she said, listening intently.

In faltering accents first, then with increasing eloquence, Ottorino recounted every occurrence since his arrival at Palermo; he dwelt long on their supposed meeting at Santa Lucia, and the scene in the cavern, the last and only dark point remaining, which had risen a barrier between them to the present hour.

"Then you are still doubting?" she exclaimed, noting his tone of hesitancy.

"My last doubts vanished with the spirits which the wizard conjured up before the duke, whom they forced to disclose the unhallowed mystery of his crimes, — and his love for you. Though sorcery compelled it, — though the phantom of murdered Enrico rose from his grave, rousing his jealous fears, darkness and the terrific silence of death did the work, and in his delirium the duke confessed so much that his words threw a light into the strange secrets which had long haunted me with shadows, like certainties. And it was the duke's paramour who suggested my presence for causes even now unknown to me, though something she spoke of proving the innocence of one over whom a dark cloud had long been hanging."

Helena listened attentively. But as Ottorino's tale proceeded, as the certainty of the duke's terrible plots flashed over her, she grew quite colourless, and when he revealed to her the duke's dark insinuations that she had lured to his death the emperor's son, she would have fallen had not his arms supported her.

"And you believed?" she stammered, pale as death.

"No, my Helena, no! Banish for ever from your heart this rankling, poisonous thought! The dark cloud has disappeared. Oh, let it not settle over us again!"

Helena's head sank on her bosom, while passively her hands remained in his.

"I had taught my soul forbearance in the impossibility

of ever being yours, — and now, since you know there is a curse denounced on all who love me, on all my love approaches, on mine own head and on yours, if you will not desist, — what shall I do? Your life is not worth one apostonaro if you remain in Palermo. You say you have heard such marvellous things under Monte Pellegrino; there lives one woman who could tell you that which would cause you to turn to stone, and often she wonders at her own mettle that suffers her to endure in silence.”

“Helena,” Ottorino spoke, after a brief pause, “do you love me?”

“Ah! Why do you ask? You know it but too well, Ottorino, even to my heart’s core,” she replied, abandoning herself to his encircling arms.

“Then, my love, I will remain if all the fiends of darkness rise against me”

“Alas, — one were enough! But since you will not heed my warning, — since you will not fly alone, — let us fly together! Only on the high seas are we safe from the duke’s murderous steel. His terrible accomplice, the Catalan, tracks all my steps, and his demeanour has wondrously changed of late. I fear the worst, for Crivello is sullen and skulks, an ever sure symptom that he is steeling himself to some deed of terror. Take me with you, beloved! Wait not the coronation! I love you, — I am all yours! I would gladly welcome death for your sake and by your side, — but to know your life imperilled, and the nightly terrors my own dismal prison-house, — it is more than I can bear.”

“Your life is mine and mine the right to guard it, to protect you against the world. We will leave this very night. I know an old boatman who has plied many years between these shores. I will leave orders with Canaletto

and a message for the king. But we must hasten, — are you ready to follow me, beloved?”

With a cry of anguish Helena glided into her lover's arms. Her face was deadly pale. Their eyes met, and their souls held silent commune. Bright and clear the moonlight bathed the cypress-trees bordering the approach to the kiosk, like silent wardens of the past; orange blossoms and magnolias wafted their intoxicating odours into the balmy night air.

“It is growing late and we require secrecy and speed,” Ottorino at last broke the silence. “Your duenna is peering from yonder kiosk, and I fear she is not as sleepy as she affects, though rubbing her eyes and yawning lustily. Still, — she will have to become used to this sight sooner or later. I will hasten to Khalesa, to arrange with Canaletto, then to the boat, to safety, and to freedom.”

“I will meet you at midnight in the garb of a nun at the Dominican's hermitage,” replied Helena. “I shall wear a mask, for the duke and his henchman are ever wakeful, — besides, I fear the boatman's inquisitive gaze. And now one last farewell glimpse of heaven, till the convent bells of Santa Lucia peal the hour,” she added, with a smile, while her eyes with their magic spell held those of Ottorino.

Embracing her with passionate tenderness, the Visconti pressed his lips to those whose sweetness had never ceased to haunt him. And loving so passionately and with a nature fraught with the glowing sun of her land, Helena in the self-oblivious abandonment of ecstatic tenderness wreathed her beautiful arms around his neck, meeting the pressure with equal fervour.

Then with one last passionate glance of love they parted, eager for the hour when the frail craft would

carry them beyond the reach of the dread spell hovering over their lives.

The convent bells of Santa Lucia chimed the midnight hour, when Ottorino, arriving at the friar's hermitage, found Helena waiting in the deep shadows of the palms and sycamores. Their wide-spreading branches almost concealed the narrow path leading to the landing where the old boatman lay in waiting. After an interchange of mute greetings, they proceeded on their way till the landing came in sight, and with it a boat, half-hidden in the reeds. Ottorino whispered constant words of encouragement to his companion, for her terror seemed so great as to completely rob her of the faculty of speech. They were fast approaching the shore, and Ottorino pointed to the sea.

"Courage, my love, — courage! Bright gleams our star in yonder heavens, and the gates of liberty are nigh!"

The firm pressure of the hand he held in his own was her only response, yet his soothing words hardly allayed her fears, for she glanced wistfully around, back into the shadows, as, making their way through the reeds, they approached the boat, in which the old ferryman lay in his wonted semiconscious trance.

"Ply thine oars, old man, — this is no time for sleeping," Ottorino called, as he started to enter the small craft, drawing Helena after him. The boatman's slumbers seemed to be heavy, for he stirred not, but when Ottorino attempted to rouse him from his lethargy, his foot slipped on a wet, slimy substance. Even while the Lombard fell, his eyes met a sight which froze the very life-blood in his veins, for from the old man's side protruded the hilt of a poniard, whose aim had been but too true. Striking the bottom of the craft, Ottorino felt

the planks parting under him, while the murdered boatman fell over his sinking body. Simultaneously a shrill whistle resounded along the beach; from the tall reeds rushed a half-dozen or more bravi, masked and armed to the teeth, a masked horseman in a long Spanish mantle urging them to his purpose from under the boughs of a wide-spreading plane-tree, which but partially concealed him from view.

When Helena beheld her protector falling, she uttered a low outcry of dismay, but ere she realized what had happened she felt a cover thrown over her head; stout arms lifted her from the sinking craft and bore her lifeless form — for she had swooned from the excess of terror — through the softly whispering reeds. The masked horseman, after a parting glance at the spot where the craft had gone down with the old boatman and Lombard, rode in silence after them.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ATTACK ON THE TORRE

ANOTHER day had gone down the never returning tide of time.

While the Apulian barons were assembled in the gloomy palace of the Duke of Altamura, a wild tumult roared and clattered around the walls of the Torre del Diavolo. The moon had scarcely risen in the eastern horizon when out of swamps and marshes surrounding the lone tower, out of brushwood and ruins, rose a shadowy array of soldiery, who surrounded the duke's stronghold while the guards, taking advantage of their master's absence, indulged in games and pastimes of their own. Unmistakable preparations for storming the massive structure were in progress; axes, knives, and catapults in the shape of huge boulders were placed in readiness under the sheltering boughs of the surrounding oaks. The men-at-arms were mailed to do battle to the death, and seemed to wait but the signal of their leader, a gaunt giant, who watched the progress of the siege seated upon his coal-black charger of pure Norman blood. After a brief consultation between the Duke of Lesina and two subordinate leaders, three men-at-arms proceeded to the gates of the Torre, and, knocking against it with all their might, demanded admittance. Some time elapsed ere response was made, and their crashing knocks became

louder and more importunate, when a voice from within demanded to know the cause of the disturbance.

The Duke of Lesina had slowly approached the moat, keenly watching every movement on the battlements, but when the din of voices from within was audible, he could restrain himself no longer.

"Hounds and bastards," he cried, "it is I, the Duke of Lesina, who bid you lower the bridge and open the gates, else I will drive you out like rats with burning pitch and oil."

There was no response to this demand. The defenders of the Torre, being without a leader, had withdrawn in alarm and consternation. The beleaguerer's summons meeting apparently but with mute defiance, Lesina ordered his men-at-arms to the assault. With fierce shouts some rushed headlong into the ditches, while others procured ladders to scale the walls. But by this time Crivello's Catalans had somewhat recovered from their first panic, and those who were the most eager in the assault were crushed beneath huge stones thrown from the walls with prodigious force, while others fell transfixed with spears and arrows, and the more sober began to misdoubt the success of the enterprise.

The old Duke of Lesina, brandishing a sword of tremendous length, now lashed his charger under the ramparts.

"Send us the woman, the recreant nun, ere we tear down this pile over her cursed head!" thundered the old warrior to the men-at-arms in the defences. "Send us the woman, — we will listen to no other terms, — send us the woman!"

The Catalans, to whom this speech was addressed, seemed to enter into deliberations, aware that unless word could be sent to the duke they would hardly be able to

hold the old pile against the hundreds rushing to the assault. But more than they feared the wrath of the old leader they dreaded the fury of the duke, and at length Lesina's summons was answered with a volley of stones and arrows, the defence being directed by a woman garbed in black, who had emerged on the ramparts just as the Catalans were weighing their cause in the balance. An inarticulate outcry of fury broke from the lips of Lesina when he recognized Francesca, and in a few moments the ladders erected to scale the defences hung thick with combatants, while under his immediate supervision a ponderous machine was dragged against the walls. It was formed of four lofty timbers carried by a score of men, and crossed with bars so as to make four steep ladders to the top. The men-at-arms surged with great eagerness around the conveyance, so as to increase its shock when hurled against the massive oaken doors. So fearful was the impetus and so tremendous the crash with which the beam struck them, that it knocked them out of their hinges, causing them to almost topple over.

The Duke of Lesina uttered a triumphant cry, while the consternation among the besieged was so great that they stared without stirring at the formidable catapult. In that moment's pause the besiegers broke down the door and rushed with a fierce shout of victory into the causeway opening before them.

Keenly the old baron's eyes were fixed upon the only exit through which the woman on whose head he had vowed destruction must come. But instead of Francesca an avalanche of armed men swept down upon his rear, and a deadly conflict began to rage on all sides amidst deafening shouts, groans, and triumphant blasts.

It was the Duke of Altamura who had appeared upon the scene.

Secretly warned, he had quickly rallied an armed band around him, and in the midst of the hideous din of battle he was heard encouraging his soldiery and bearing the brunt of the fight where strife and conflict raged fiercest.

No sooner had the old duke laid eyes upon his mortal enemy than he dashed in person to the attack. Armed but with his flambeau and unmindful of the fact in the fever heat of his passions, the old warrior plunged into the thick of the fray. His mantle and surcoat were torn away by Catalan spears, yet he forced his way to the very spot where Altamura waited his onrush. Simultaneously a phalanx of pikemen, descending from the opposite direction, came with full force upon the assailants. Lesina's contingents were swept back, the old leader brandishing his sword in frenzied rage and urging his men to break through the barriers and to capture the outcast of his house.

The Catalans on the ramparts caught fresh courage when they beheld the forces which Altamura brought up to the rescue, while Lesina's attacking ranks surged in wild confusion around their leader. Suddenly a bright blaze arose, and a torrent of flaming pitch rushed from the battlements upon the heads of the assailants. Bathed in liquid flames, a part of the combatants rushed pell-mell into the ditches, and many were suffocated by the weight of their own armour. But Lesina's main chivalry rallied and met the double shock of Altamura's Catalans with undaunted courage, while a terrific hand-to-hand conflict ensued around the entrance. Suddenly Altamura, turning deadly pale, turned to Crivello, who rode by his side. "Hist, Crivello! Who is it that shields the old robber? Look — he averts all strokes of men's swords."

"I see no one but Lesina," Crivello replied, glancing in the direction indicated.

"Fool! Think you these eyes play me false? I note him well enough with his dark crest," returned the duke, fiercely. "The dark one,—now he pushes open the gate,—nothing of earthly strength might do it."

"My lord,—there are a score or more raising the timber to hurl it over,—they know not that it falls on its carriage either way," said the Catalan, but the words died on his lips. For a moment the mighty timbers quivered in the air, equally poised, then they struck the heavy gates with such force that when they fell everything before them was crushed into a horrid mass of blood and steel.

A terrible shout of triumph went up as the last impediment fell. Like a mad torrent which has broken over its embankments, Lesina's soldiery swept into the Torre del Diavolo, killing and mangling everything in their path. Another body threw themselves with renewed vigour upon the duke's Catalans, whom the breaking down of the heavy iron-bound doors had for the moment almost unnerved. The rescuing party were unable to hurry to the assistance of the defenders, whom they soon beheld in a fierce hand-to-hand encounter on the ramparts, which resulted in their succumbing to the constantly increasing forces of their assailants. Lesina himself, surrounded by a choice body of men, was again guarding the only exit from the Torre, and, turning once or twice to direct the assault, he met the glare of Altamura's eyes, which were like those of a frenzied animal.

At this moment a large wicker basket was raised on the ramparts, and when it was heaved over the walls six gory heads were hurled, as if with the force of a catapult, at the feet of Altamura's horse, which shied and reared upon its haunches, but with difficulty controlled by the duke's iron grip.

"Dost thou miss any of them, most illustrious assassin, traitor, and seducer? Or seekest thou among them for the beardless cheek of thy paramour?" shouted Lesina, with a fearful laugh. "Bide but a few moments, and I will send it to thee on the point of a spear, thanking thee for this noble chance to wipe the stain from our name in her degenerate blood."

"Even as thou wilt," returned Altamura, with a shrug. "Do thy worst against the wanton, thy kinswoman—I defy thee!"

"Dog and ravisher," roared the old baron, "I will tear this doting paramour of thine from her sanctuary and burn this cursed pile over her head as a funeral pyre."

"Sanctuary?" Altamura exclaimed, with a wild laugh of derision. "There is a chapel within the Torre, but to prove thy lies and false accusations I withdraw therefrom all privileges, and shall devote its shrines to the rudest wrath of my soldiery. Ho, my men, forward! Spare none, slay all!"

But while shaking his clenched fists at his enemy, Altamura was nevertheless forced to retreat, for a veritable rain of fire and burning pitch was hurled against him from the ramparts, the intruders making use of his own materials of defence.

"We shall soon clear the air of thy pestilential presence," shouted Lesina, snatching a string of flaming tow covered with pitch, and hurling it at the duke across the heads of his own men. With a fierce shout his soldiery dashed to the attack. And now Lesina swept everything before him; nothing could withstand the fury of his onslaught. The Catalans were driven into the Torre, and the narrow causeways, the winding stairs, and dark corridors were strewn with heaps of the dead and

dying. Blood began to flow in streams when the old baron reached a massive oaken door, around which a fierce hand-to-hand conflict began to rage. After an obstinate resistance the defenders were overcome, and the door, giving way under the pressure, revealed when it broke down an oval, tomblike recess, in which cowered the form of a woman wrapped in a dark mantle, her hands clasped, her head bent forward, her eyes glaring madly upon the intruder, who was shouting some command to his men-at-arms, which these, heartless and cruel as they were, hesitated to execute. Lesina pointed to the crouching form of the hapless girl.

"On with you!" he shouted. "Drag her out of her hole, or I will brain him who refuses on this very spot."

The pikemen stood irresolute; there was something in the mad beauty of the woman before them that wielded its influence even over their stony hearts.

"My lord,—remember it is your brother's blood which you would shed," remonstrated one of the younger leaders, pushing forward to the side of Lesina.

"'Tis false—'tis false!" roared the old lion, with frantic fury. "I will burn her for the wanton and false nun that she has been adjudged; the name of Lesina she has defiled!"

Francesca's eyes rested on the youthful knight who had taken her part.

"Nay, signor, plead not for me, but least of all because of my father's blood, lest it boil and burst in my veins!" she said, with the calmness of despair. "I ask no mercy, none of thee, brother of Guido Lesina,—a heavier curse rests on thee for violating sanctuary."

"Sanctuary!" returned the old baron, with a wild laugh of scorn. "Ha, by our Lady,—thou speakest well! For even he, thy seducer, declared to me within

hearing of these that he would raise the sanctity of the spot, just to show how much he cared for thee, his paramour."

At these words the woman started up and turned to the speaker with such a glance of incredulity and horror that even Lesina was struck with it.

"Hast thou come hither to lie without a blush, like the basest churl?" she exclaimed. "Does not death, where-with thou menacest me, appease thy vengeance? Hack me to pieces rather than speak these words! But they are false — false, and thou art damned even below my station for calumniating humanity more blackly than the fiends on the day of doom!"

With a terrible oath Lesina reiterated the statement, but instead of impressing the unhappy woman with its truth, it roused a passion more terrible within her than even the immediate presence of the most direful death had excited.

"You lie — you lie!" she shrieked. "Give me but an hour in which to warn him, and if he tear not down these very walls to rescue me hell is as true as he were false!"

"Seize her, ye dastardly dogs, seize her, cowards! Are you afraid of a woman?" shouted Lesina.

"Let not my lord be beguiled into a rash deed by your mortal foe, who perchance is tired of her and would have you remove a scandal from his path," pleaded Leo del Valle, the young leader who had once before espoused Francesca's cause, "lest regret may come when it is too late."

Lesina himself looked staggered at this argument, but it aroused such unbridled and furious wrath in her whom the words meant to serve that she sprang up from her

crouching position, standing before the young chieftain like the flaming angel of vengeance.

"Again and again—you lie! Oh, that I were but a man, to fight with you to the death!" she cried aloud, in her mastering agony. "No, you are not a man, but a demon, who has dreamed this on some burning pillow of anguish, and whose hell it is to make others share it."

Even as Francesca concluded this invective, sudden as the bursting of a white squall at sea there arose an uproar outside which rang far and deep through the recesses of the Torre. Shrieks, yells, and the rush of unnumbered feet mingled with distant shouts, while blasts of trumpets resounded above the deafening din. Even Lesina seemed puzzled, for he made an irresolute gesture to seize Francesca with his own hands, but Leo del Valle caught him by the arm, and, suddenly darting from the shrine, Francesca ran up the steps of the altar, shrieking till the very vaults rang with the echo:

"Rescue—rescue! He comes—he comes!"

Even Lesina paled as yells from without returned a fearful chorus to the shout, "Altamura! Altamura!"

Maddened with wrath, the old baron turned as the rush and roar, shrieks and yells, swept like a hurricane through the ponderous portals. It was the Duke of Altamura who was leading the havoc, appearing high above the heads of his men-at-arms and shouting with a voice that pealed like the doom of judgment into the ears of those within, "No quarter! No sanctuary!"

And behind him a mass of spearmen rolled in with the cry, "Kill—kill!" surrounding Lesina and his men with their superior numbers.

Francesca stood at the altar grasping a massive ornament of gold, her eyes and nostrils dilated, her black hair dishevelled, and, distinguishing the voice of the man for

whom she had given up all that is dear and sacred to woman, she made the sanctuary ring with the delirious shriek:

“Rescue — rescue! I am here, Ferrando! I am here!”

“Forward, my men — forward! Slay all, spare none, man or woman!” the duke was heard to yell. “Death to all, — spare none!”

Francesca heard not these words because of the frantic cries with which she endeavoured to attract, as she imagined, the assistance of him upon whom she had every claim on earth.

The knightly spirit in Leo del Valle, upon hearing this murderous order and seeing his chief surrounded, was aroused to the highest pitch, and, while doubtful about his own safety, he was determined to protect the woman at every hazard. He rushed back to the altar, but as he approached Francesca raised one of the massive pieces of plate and shrieked aloud that she would hurl it at him if he advanced one step.

“I will but protect you, else you are lost!” replied the young leader. “I heard the duke command even now to slay you for a witch who had intercourse with evil spirits.”

“You lie — you lie! Ferrando has hazarded all to save me, — I am saved!” she shrieked, wildly. “Help, Ferrando, help — save your Francesca!”

Almost as she uttered these words a horseman crashed with a terrific din into the centre of the sanctuary, flourishing his falchion in the midst of the cataract of wild soldiery. Some of these were mangled beneath the relentless hoofs, while others, ere being overridden, yelled for mercy or grappled with the steed as their slayer hacked them down.

The horseman halted, and Francesca, recognizing him, attempted to rush down from the altar, crying in frantic joy:

"Ferrando — Ferrando — save me! I am here — I am here!"

"What woman is this who speaks to us as familiarly as to her dog?" the duke turned to Crivello. "Castellan, do you know her?"

"Horror and anguish! Have this night's terrors changed me so, Ferrando, — do you not know me?" cried Francesca, with an agony in her shrieking tones which pierced all the uproar of human anguish around.

"Yea, — forsooth, — thou art my wife, wanton, — art thou not? The castellan's wife of the Torre del Diavolo, speak!" hissed Crivello, lashing himself into the fury necessary to stifle even the last compunction of his conscience. Then, raising his bloody axe, he spurred his own horse so furiously that it actually darted up the steps of the altar, but he reached it not sufficiently near his victim to execute his murderous design, for at that very moment a knight in dark armour stepped out from behind a pillar and dashed his shield with such force on the charger's head that the latter, overturning, hurled the castellan backward on the pavement below, where he lay dazed and motionless.

"In the name of the king I command cessation of strife and bloodshed," he exclaimed, in tones loud and clear, "and two thousand Saracens wait but my signal to enforce the royal command!"

The duke started as if stung by a serpent.

"Ah, — it is thou, knight of the Viper," he said, with a glance of mortal hatred. "Bide but till we chastise those insolents — in Altamura's domains Altamura is master!"



"I DEMAND THIS WOMAN, DUKE OF ALTAMURA!"



Ere the Visconti could reply a din of voices arose, above which was heard that of Leo del Valle, who had so far miraculously escaped the clutches of Altamura's men-at-arms, crying, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary! Rescue the lady!"

This cry suspended for a moment the horrible destruction which raged on all sides, and which had already covered the shrines with blood and brains and the pavement with mangled carcasses.

Ottorino now stepped forward with drawn sword, and, pointing to Francesca, who gazed horror-stricken at her would-be deliverer, he spoke with icy calmness:

"I demand this woman, Duke of Altamura!"

"What? This woman?" exclaimed the duke, laughing with mingled fury and derision until the very roof re-echoed his frenzied merriment.

"I demand this woman! Thou hast avowed that she is nothing to thee, and hast subjected her to the infamous insults of yonder caitiff, — I demand this woman, and, by the Almighty God, I mean to make good my demand!"

"Take me from his clutches, Ferrando, — take me from his clutches!" shrieked Francesca. "What means this, — what means this?"

"What it means, thou guileless bride of Christ?" roared the duke, whose eyes glowed like living coals behind the ghastly pallor of his cheeks. "What it means? We owe thy gallant deliverer a woman in exchange for an angel, who forsook him at the very gates of paradise, and he has chosen thee to console him, — thee!"

Without heeding the duke's speech Ottorino turned to Francesca.

"By all the saints, lady, as you know me for a man of honour, trust and follow me! I mean but for your life and honour, — pray do not resist!"

But these words only increased the woman's fear, and she gazed with such an expression of abject terror at the duke that no words seemed sufficiently strong to express it; then she flung herself distractedly on her knees, almost directly under the hoofs of his rearing steed.

"In very truth, fair lady, this fancy for us comes somewhat sudden," the duke laughed direfully, "but — if you fear, here is my dagger," and he mockingly extended the hilt of a sharp and bloody weapon to his kneeling suppliant. She clutched it, darting up and holding it high over her head, shrieking, while she watched his eye like a tigress expecting the spring of a panther:

"Speak but the word, thou fathomless traitor! Never until now have I warned thee that thy wizard predicted some day thou shouldst owe thy life to me, — speak! Shall I strike this steel into my heart — for thine is harder than adamant!"

"She raves, Crivello, take her away, — remove her to the castle!" ordered the duke, not without a trace of anxiety in his tones.

"Touch her but with the remotest tip of thy finger and I will for once debase this good steel in ridding humanity of thy murderous presence!" said Ottorino, as the Catalan staggered giddily forward. "None but myself will be her escort, and see thou, Sidi Yussuff, that the orders of the king are obeyed!"

These words he addressed to the turbaned leader behind him, who kissed his sabre, while the duke yielded without further remonstrance. Half-unconscious, Francesca suffered the Lombard to lead her away, keeping her head turned and her eyes fixed on the duke in a stupor of speechless despair until she was out of sight.

"Lead forth the old robber and truce-breaker," the duke now shouted, with unbridled fury, turning with a gesture

of livid wrath in the direction whence he supposed Lesina to have witnessed the foregoing scene, but when his command met with no response he repeated it in louder and sterner tones. There was some commotion, as of parties searching for one to appear in a large crowd, and at last Crivello, who had hoped to cool his vengeance for the injuries he had suffered, staggered toward the duke.

"He is not to be found, my lord, — he must have escaped during the struggle for the wanton."

Hardly had the word died on his lips when the duke dealt the castellan such a terrific blow in the face that the latter fell his entire length on the blood-begrimed stones. "Cur of a Catalan! Dare breathe again thy vileness upon her name and I will have thee impaled over a slow fire! Up!" he continued, approaching the prostrate form, and kicking him as one would a dog. "Up! Thou hast been so wondrously brave against a woman, — up in pursuit of Lesina!"

Half-dazed and with the sullen demeanour of the wounded tiger, the Catalan rose. His face was ashen gray; ropelike his thick black hair hung over his begrimed forehead, while his bloodshot eyes were riveted on the ground. Summoning around him his men-at-arms, they stalked over the mangled, prostrate forms of the dead and dying, and left the Torre, from which Lesina had so mysteriously vanished. Then the duke strode up to the immobile Saracen leader, grasped his black beard with a sudden and unforeseen motion of his right hand, and, giving it a vigorous pull, hissed in the teeth of the emir:

"Dog of an infidel! Tell the king his commands are obeyed!"

CHAPTER XV.

AN ADVENTURE

SLOWLY the sun of another day had sunk to rest, and one by one the stars began to appear in the sapphire vault of heaven. Manfred, dreaming of the future and the impending realization of his keenest hopes and desires, was traversing one of the more secluded walks of the garden, when he heard a hobbling step behind him, and, looking around, beheld an aged and withered crone, who upon overtaking him immediately prostrated herself at his feet. At first his preoccupied memory scarcely recognized her, till the tones of her ravenlike voice fell upon his ear.

The old hag seemed to mistake the king for another, for, rising at his beck, she croaked: "Hist, knight, — I bear a secret matter. But first, that thou mayest believe in me — knowest thou this Nazarene amulet, which I bring as a token from one who, in great dread of a mighty enemy, has sought refuge among the followers of the prophet?"

Manfred scanned the uncanny messenger with a scrutinizing gaze.

"I have seen it ere now," he replied deliberately, taking care not to reveal his identity, while he glanced at the quaint silver medallion which the Moorish hag held out to him in her withered claw.

"The lady to whom this medallion belongs, and who

hath often sought the aid of our power, sends thee this token and by it adjures thee to see her in all haste and secrecy, and to devise means for immediate flight," said the crone. "Or, if it be not possible for thee to flee with her this very night, at least she would confide to thee a matter upon which hangs life and death."

The old hag paused, her dark eyes eagerly scanning the face of the supposed Lombard. The king had little cause to place any trust in his Moorish suppliant, though the message sounded plausible and was supported by circumstances but too well known to him through the Visconti. Accordingly the final statement, coupled with his information regarding Helena di Miraval's mysterious abduction and his own knowledge of the duke's remorseless temper, excited Manfred's apprehension in the highest degree. He rapidly revolved in his mind the chances of reaching Ottorino, but, considering the nature and urgency of the appeal, he upon second consideration abandoned the thought, prompted as much by the fascination of the adventure itself as impelled by the hope of proving instrumental in restoring his lost treasure to the despairing Lombard. Convinced, after many inquiries, of the plausibility of the old dame's statements, Manfred finally resolved to accompany her to Helena's place of refuge. His usually darkly garbed person he fancied would run little risk of being recognized in the ever deepening dusk, the less so with the addition of a nocturnal visor and cloak, worn by the nobles at a period when innumerable feuds rendered almost every third man an enemy. The secret hope of gathering intelligence more definite in regard to Enrico's mysterious death proved another equally potent factor urging Manfred onward. After having adjusted visor and cloak, he commanded the hag to lead the way, following his guide at some

distance and taking care not to lose sight of her. After traversing the vale of the Oreto, they at length arrived at the alchemist's habitation. Without that misgiving which he for whom the summons had been meant would have experienced upon beholding the dismal watercourse, Manfred consented to enter the narrow channel, the Moorish hag leading the way. For some time they proceeded by the dim light which fell from between dark and gloomy walls, until Manfred imagined that they were near the place indicated by the old woman. Suddenly a loud crash sounded from behind. Manfred had scarcely time to turn in alarm to ascertain the cause ere streams of light blazed down upon him from various unsuspected holes in the lofty walls of the enclosure, and innumerable faces, instinct with malice and rage, peered at him. A storm of hooting, revilings, and cries for vengeance assailed his ears like discordant shrieks in a tropical Indian forest. Arquebuses and crossbows were levelled at his head from many points, and he perceived that the waters in the dark channel were rising rapidly, and that an iron grill had descended between himself and the exit. At this fearful crisis a door in front flew open and the form of a half-clad girl appeared, shrieking, " Enrico — Enrico ! " with delirious and despairing iteration. His aged guide called to Manfred to fly and save himself, while she ran up the stairs, seizing the girl in her arms. The king made but one spring after her into the vault, which was in total darkness, when suddenly he felt himself seized on all sides. His efforts to draw his sword proved futile, for it had been snatched from the sheath from behind. At the same instant lights flashed on all sides, and he found himself completely hemmed in by a throng of Moslems, armed with knives and poniards and raging with wild imprecations and fury. Treachery and Alta-

mura were ideas which flashed almost simultaneously through Manfred's mind. He anticipated little less than immediate destruction, yet he disdained to reveal his identity, determined to discover the clue to the mystery which had so long baffled mankind, and which the mere suspicion of his presence would shroud in abysmal darkness. He had not fully decided upon the course which would lead him from the present dilemma, when the old crone, his former guide, suddenly rushed upon him, shrieking, while with her long, bony claws she clutched at his surcoat.

"Dog of mine enemy! Shall I witness for thee that thou hast betrayed and defiled the pure blood of Omar, and the punishment which is upon it? Accursed be thou and all thy tribe, and blessed by Allah be they who contrive at thy destruction!"

Manfred receded as close to the wall as the narrow channel would permit, resolved only as a last resort to reveal his identity.

"Bind him! Lead him before the king,—the friend of the Saracens!" "Yield thee, accursed giaour, betrayer of the daughter of the prophets," some voices were heard to yell. From the sudden stillness which succeeded this outburst of frenzy, Manfred augured that there was no immediate danger of assassination. The enraged throng pressed around him closer and closer, and to argue with them with their passions heated to their present frenzy he knew would be a vain and fruitless endeavour. The mad girl's shrieks continued to ring from a secluded chamber down the gloomy gallery. Suddenly a dark form loomed up in the background, causing the Moslems to give way on both sides and revealing the passion-inflamed countenance of the Duke of Altamura.

"Villain — most prodigious villain!" he exclaimed,

swiftly approaching his prisoner and no longer able to disguise his triumph. "At last I have tracked thee to thy haunts! I will not recite all thy crimes, the basest among which is the use thou hast made of thy Moorish paramour to spread black suspicion against myself. Admit thy guilt, — thou hast but scant time for confession, and less for repentance."

Manfred, who had remained silent during the mad uproar provoked by his arrival, found himself under the necessity of abandoning a policy which the entrance of the duke rendered equally futile and perilous, for, once the signal given to seize his person, he would be unable to make himself heard in the frenzied clamour and uproar.

"Thy steel is swift, Duke of Altamura — though thy vengeance has mistaken its victim!" He spoke in tones as clear and calm as if the words were carved out of marble.

At the sound of the well-known voice the duke started, his pallor deepening into more livid hues, and he glanced from the speaker to the Moorish hags and from the latter to his prisoner with such an expression of incredulous amazement that the words he tried to speak were choked in the utterance. Nor did Manfred afford him time for parley, for, raising his visor, he stood revealed to the whole evil company by the glorious wealth of his golden locks. So terrible was the consternation among the tools of the duke's malice that they prostrated themselves as one man at his feet, not daring to raise their eyes to the royal countenance.

"Gaze not so wildly, my lord duke," Manfred continued, in accents not devoid of irony. "We came but hither as proxy for another for whom thou hadst prepared this splendid reception."

The duke bent low to conceal his mortification.

"I crave the king's pardon!" he stammered, after a pause. "Little did I expect to meet the son of Frederick the emperor in these hovels and in this company! As for that other, — I owe him scant thanks and less good will, for what ulterior motive may urge on his frenzy, — the intent deserves of recognition!"

A disdainful wave of Manfred's hand interrupted the speaker.

"We came not hither to engage in such subtle controversy. Bring hither the girl whose shrieks were to have been the signal of the Visconti's doom, — we would have speech with her."

This command was directed toward the trembling, cowering hag, who would have slunk away had not Manfred now barred the egress. She mumbled an inarticulate response, but, instead of obeying, her gaze rose in mute interrogation to the Duke of Altamura.

"By the splendour of God!" Manfred turned upon the vindictive crone. "Whose commands are obeyed here? Bring the girl to our presence, else thou wilt not cheat the hangman longer out of thy time-withered carcass!"

There was something in Manfred's eye which caused the hag to rise and slink away, not, however, ere she had, unobserved by the king, exchanged a meaning glance with the duke. The cries of the mad girl had ceased, and, heedless of Altamura's sullen presence, Manfred awaited with ill-concealed anxiety the return of the old dame. But moment after moment passed and she came not. The king was on the point of penetrating alone, regardless of the hazard of the venture, into the intricate labyrinth of the old pile, when shuffling steps were heard approaching from a direction whence he had least expected them, and both Moorish dames came slowly out of the dusk,

carrying between them the apparently lifeless body of Leila. The hags laid their comparatively light burden at Manfred's feet, while with many grotesque bends and malicious leers of their serpent eyes they expanded on the strange illness of the unfortunate girl. Like a waxen image Leila lay upon the faded blanket which they had hastily wrapped around her frail body.

Manfred bent over the wasted form of the poor mad girl, regarding her with long and wistful gaze, then he turned a terrible look upon the duke, whose countenance was overspread with a purple pallor and whose eyes dared not meet those which he knew were riveted upon him.

"Guide us back to earth and lead the way," Manfred at last said, imperiously, while the duke stammered some incoherent apologies and, bowing low in deference to the royal command, preceded the king through the dark passage; but such a terrible glance did he bestow on his Moorish coadjutors that, shuddering and whining, they raised Leila's frail body between them and crept back into their hovels.

After having safely emerged into the moonlit groves, the king parted from Altamura and returned alone to the palace, without being one jot nearer the solution of the mystery than before.

An hour later the duke entered a dismal chamber in the Torre del Diavolo, which, securely locked and dimly lighted, had escaped the devastation wrought by Lesina's band in the duke's stronghold. For a moment Altamura paused, while a convulsive tremor shook his frame.

"How dreary this abode, — since she has left it," he murmured, glancing around uneasily; then he turned to Crivello the Catalan, who had preceded his terrible master and was awaiting the manifestation of his will.

"The hour has come, Crivello," said the duke, changing his tone to a sneer, "when thou must call up the flimsy ghosts of all those thou hast sent butchered to the fiends, to help thee lead thy victims to their doom."

Crivello stared aghast at this ominous speech.

"My lord, — what may this now avail, — the coronation is scarce a day removed?"

"Between life and death there is not one moment, Crivello," remarked the duke, sombrely. "A day! 'Tis long enough for the destruction of the whole human race, — had we but the means in our hands. I practise the maxims I preach, crushing those I have provoked, striking suddenly and with but one blow, rooting out the obstacles to my greatness, thus depriving my haters of their sole balance against me."

Crivello glanced at his terrible master with an expression of awe.

"And has your Excellency chosen me to be present at the feast, that mine ears may tingle with the music?"

"Thou knowest I am at times of a sallow and melancholy mood, and require strange harmonies to enliven my dark meditations!"

"Your Excellency has marked some — high in the Church."

"What of it? What ails thee, my man?"

"You would not slay them as —"

"As their more worldly brethren? Believe me, Crivello, when they are laid out side by side, their carcasses deprived of their costly covers, — not even thy discriminating eyes will be able to discover churchman from layman."

"But you would not lay hands on a cardinal?" exclaimed the Catalan, in amazement, crossing himself repeatedly.

“ Shall I rear the viper brood in mine own house? I am no respecter of persons, Crivello. They shall perish together, — only the cardinals shall come last, that their more worldly brethren may profit by their parting spiritual advice. And now take the lamp and lead the way below. The moon looks too revealingly into our enterprise — and thy too tender conscience.”

Crivello bowed in silence, though he did not conceal an expression of deep chagrin, which the duke failed not to note, for his penetrating gaze never abandoned the castellan. The latter led the way with rapid strides, and they soon arrived at a massive oaken door. The duke burst this open with a furious kick and entered in advance of the castellan.

It was a gloomy chamber with grated windows, opening into a narrow courtyard. There in the corner, his large white eyes glaring with a strange expression of bloodthirsty eagerness, knelt Zem, the African, busily engaged in stripping the bulky carcass of a man. The castellan, holding high the lamp, stared with dogged impassiveness at the spectacle which revealed itself to his stony gaze. The light, falling on a ghastly and distorted visage, revealed the features of Landulf of Trent, and also the means of his death, a handkerchief knotted in a peculiar manner around his neck. At a little distance lay another corpse, partially thrust into a sack; a third body, that of San Severino, lay stretched out, black in the face, the eyes protruding from their sockets.

The Catalan approached the partially concealed carcass, and, bending over it with his lamp, endeavoured to identify the victim, but, failing in his efforts, his gaze returned inquiringly to the duke.

“ Here lies all that is mortal of Count Cenci, plenipotentiary of the King of Sicily at the Conclave of Vi-

terbo. The Lord grant him a happy awakening," the duke responded, in a nasal, canting tone, whose sarcasm contrasted fearfully with the air of death which hovered around the very walls. "As for San Severino," he continued, in accents more fierce, "let him seek his bride in hell, since she spurned his suit on earth. And yonder Teuton,—ah! He loved our Southern skies so well that we may well grant him six foot of Southern earth. He was reluctant to return to his land of flaxen-haired maidens, were-wolves, and sour grapes,—perchance we did not cheat him in the exchange. And now, Crivello, thou wilt learn that I have as much need of thee as thou canst ever have of me. Follow me,—nay, fear not,—for if I wanted to slay thee thou wouldst be even now in paradise."

"I admire your Grace's policy," stammered the Catalan, half-sullen, half-sincere, "though I understand not all its intricate windings. You have despatched these,—yet your greatest enemies live: Lancia, Capece, and John of Procida."

"They live,—how long?" replied the duke, with a fearful smile, then, beckoning his companion to follow him, he led the way out of the chamber. The two crossed a shadowy court to a tower, and ascended by a flight of narrow stairs to a chamber, barred within and guarded without. For a moment he paused, turning to the castellan who was closely on his heels.

"The Conclave of Viterbo has spoken; the Cardinal of Narbonne, the mortal enemy of the Hohenstaufen, is the chosen successor to Urban."

While the Catalan stared incredulously at the speaker, the duke, passing the guard, unlocked the door, whereupon he and Crivello entered, and noiselessly the portals closed behind their retreating forms.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXCOMMUNICATION

THE morning of the eventful day which was to seal the destinies of the Sicilian kingdom of Hohenstaufen was slowly breaking. A distant clamour of merriment and the ringing of the bells from cloisters and convents mingled with the strains of martial music, as at early dawn a flood of horsemen swept through the verdant avenues of Palermo. The waving heron-plumes, iron-chain armour, and gleaming helmets, the rich trappings of the horses, caparisoned in velvet with silver reins, the streaming banners, turbans starred and striped with silver and gold, surmounted by lances painted red and blue, and the unsheathed scimitars, revealed the array of Sidi Yussuff's Saracens. The great Moslem leader, dressed in a purple kaftan lined with sable, and mounted upon a steed covered with steel and gold, rode at the head of almost countless files of archers, whose faces were bronzed by the suns of Syria and Iran. A discordant din of drums, flutes, timbrels, and gongs, the clash of armour, jingling of chains, and shouts of "Allah," were confounded in one terrible and warlike noise, which lingered long upon the air after the tramp of thousands of horses' hoofs had died away in the distance.

It was in the ancient cathedral of Santa Rosalia, the

patron saint of Palermo, that the coronation of Manfred as King of Sicily, Apulia, and Capua was to be consummated.

The noonday sun shed his piercing rays over the vast area of the interior, lighting up innumerable shrines and altars, all glistening with gold plate, emblazoned canopies, set forth with relics of saints and statuary and every decoration of precious ornaments. Columns of porphyry and cipolin seemed to drop like fantastic stalactites from the golden Byzantine arches, and the entire nave was bathed in glowing colour. Soft gleams of sunlight found their way through the painted windows, covering the mosaics upon the undulating walls with golden glory. The grand altar had been raised upon a circular platform, carpeted with cloth of gold and canopied by a pavilion of starry azure. It was surmounted by the diagonally crossed banners of the Ghibellines, a white lily in a field of carmine, and the imperial standards of Hohenstaufen, the crowned sun-soaring eagle in a field of azure.

The hour was early and the vast nave dreamed of the splendour of bygone days, of the destinies of days to come. Around it were the sombre and stately resting-places of princes born in the purple, assembled here from lands so distant, from the craggy heights of Hohenstaufen in far-off Suabia, from the green orchards of Cotentin, from the dry hills of Aragon. Here the conquerors of the Southland slept; the porphyry sarcophagus of King Roger the Norman stood side by side with that of Constanzia, mother of Frederick the Second, who brought Sicily to the house of Hohenstaufen and in whom the glorious dynasty of the Norman kings came to a close. In front of Constanzia's resting-place towered the porphyry tomb of her husband, Emperor Henry the Sixth, who died at Messina under sentence of excom-

munication from Celestine III., which for a time forbade his burial in hallowed ground.

Overshadowing that of King Roger rose the sarcophagus of his grandson, the great Emperor Frederick II., who died at Castel Fiorentino in Apulia. When it was opened almost a century later, after the last of his race had been swept from the throne of the land they had loved so well, the body of the emperor was found wrapt in the robes which had been given by the Saracens to Emperor Otto IV., whose aid in time they had invoked. An ancient sarcophagus on the right against the wall contained the remains of Constanzia of Aragon, the widow of Emerich, King of Hungary, the first wife, ten years older than himself, who was forced by Innocent III. upon the then youthful Emperor Frederick II. Thus almost all the great Hohenstaufen, save alone Frederick I., Barbarossa, whose body was swept away by the waves of the Kydnos during his crusade against the Seldschukkes of Damascus, — the most hated and the most beloved, — slumbered side by side under the high vaulted roof of the great Gothic pile. Here they slept unchanged, though centuries passed by. Rude hands break open the granite lids of their sepulchres, to find tresses of yellow hair, fragments of imperial mantles embroidered with the hawks and stags the royal hunter loved. But the huge stone arks remain unmoved, guarding the mouldering dust beneath the gloomy canopies of porphyry and malachite, which temper the light of the western sun.

The tolling of many bells, the clash of armour, and the shouts of the multitudes, over which rose the sound of trumpets and din of Turkish music, announced the approach of the royal procession. For some time before it appeared a melodious chant was remotely audible, min-

gling with that of the cathedral choirs with sweet and melancholy effect, as if the heavens had opened and the distant harmony descended from angelic voices. When the magnificent pageant did appear, it was a moving mass of glitter and sumptuous colour as the sun streamed down upon it. It slowly wound its way down the Cassaro, headed for the open portals of the cathedral, around which flocked an almost bewildering throng of counts, barons, noblemen, bishops, knights, friars, and beggars. The rich capes of the ecclesiastics, stiff with gold and gorgeous brocade, the jewelled mantles of the nobles, the polished breastplates and tasselled spears of the guards, the steel casques and velvet robes of the knights, the Saracenic banners, the blood-red flags with the crescent waving above thousands of turbaned heads,—all made a dazzling confusion of splendour.

First in the procession came twelve heralds upon snow-white chargers and garbed in the colours of Hohenstaufen, then came a company of Apulian spearmen, followed by another of Saracen archers. Directly in their wake marched the entire fighting array of Sidi Yussuff, and those who closely scrutinized the emir's countenance wondered at the deadly pallor of his set features, heightened by his black beard and the stony gaze with which he stared straight before him, looking neither to the left nor to the right. After these came a company of fifty pages, dressed in scarlet, green, and yellow doublets, richly embroidered, and bearing white staffs, the emblems of their peaceful mission. Another company of Apulian knights came into sight, then, head erect and towering above even the tallest in the procession, appeared Manfred, Prince of Taranto. A deafening shout went up when the people beheld their beloved ruler, conspicuous not alone by the traditional comeliness of his house, but

likewise by the peculiar magnificence of his dress. The dark green hunting-suit which he was accustomed to wear had been replaced by a garb of rich crimson satin and gold brocade; his cap with the white heron's feather was encircled by three rows of jewels, conspicuous among which were pearls and rubies of great price. His doublet glittered with so brilliant a lustre that it dazzled the eye as much as the sun. Even his boots were of fretted gold-work; and a magnificent mantle of imperial purple, lined with ermine, almost covered his noble charger. The imperial flambeau and the insignia of many illustrious orders of knighthood completed his splendid accoutrement.

Manfred was surrounded by the entire council of the kingdom. He himself rode between Frederick of Antioch, his stepbrother, and John of Procida, closely followed by Drogo, high admiral of the realm, the brothers Lancia and Capece, the Count of Caserta, and the chancellor John of Alifé. The Duke of Altamura, who rode directly in their wake, was generally remarked for his sombre habit of black velvet, which contrasted strangely with the deadly pallor of his visage. He rode at the head of the Apulian barons, and was closely followed by the Lords of Lecce, Monopoli, Bari, Andria, Foggia, Melfi, Potanza, Tricarico, Avelino, Catanzaro, Ceriguola, Aversa, Acerra, and Venosa. These in turn preceded the envoys of the Ghibelline states, vying with each other in splendour of array and accoutrement.

The sea-green banner with the Golden Viper, the emblem of the Visconti of Milan, floated proudly in the glowing sunlit air, and the Lombard contingent, led by Ottorino, moved at the head of the gleaming procession, followed by the embassies of Marino Tiepolo, Doge of Venice, and Andrea Doria, ruler of Genoa, the latter

represented by the noble Fiesco da Lavagna, afterward destined to so tragic an end. The contingent of Cangrande della Scala of Verona rode ahead the Pisan cavalcade, led by Ugguccione, leader of the Ghibellines in that third maritime city of Italy. Then one by one appeared the contingents of Feltro in Treviso, and Montefeltro in Urbino, of Obizzo of Estè and Ferrara, the envoys of Gerhard da Cammino, Lord of Padua and Treviso, of Guido of Monfort, who six years later during holy mass killed Henry, son of Richard Cornwallis, in the cathedral of Viterbo, of Cassalodia of Mantua, and of Michael, former Seneschal of King Enzo, Manfred's stepbrother, now Lord of Logodoro in Sardinia. One long array of courtly splendour comprised the embassies of Peter of Aragon, Manfred's kinsman, the Kings of Castile, and the imperial Comneni of Epirus. These embassies were followed by representatives from Asti, Imola, and Faenza, the Foccaccia of Pistoja, Malatesta, Lord of Verucchio and Rimini, William, Marquis of Montferrat, Provençan Salvani, Lord of Sienna, and the Lambertazzi of Bologna. The banners of Ghibelline Italy floated around the portals of the cathedral in imposing array: the eagle of the Polentas of Cervia and Ravenna, the green lion of Forli, the cock of the Galuras, the blue eagle of Este, the broken column of the Colonnas, the ladder of the Della Scalas, the broken loaf of the Frangipani, the flaming torch of the Modicas, and the hitherto unconquered rampant lion of Cyprus, in the azure house of Lusignan, waved proudly beside the lion of San Marco.

Helena of Epirus, the queen, with her stately retinue, consisting of the most beautiful women of Sicily, closed the procession, which now poured down the sunlit aisles, spreading fanlike to the right and left, each dignitary, nobleman, and envoy taking the station assigned to him

by the master of ceremonies. From various chapels the choirs poured forth their torrents of melody, mingling in one grand choral, as if to illustrate the union of the Church with the powers of the world, and the mighty multitude joined in the Gloria in Excelsis which rose to the vaulted roof and vibrated in long, ringing echoes.

Ottorino Visconti had taken his station in the foreground of the cathedral, and so deadly was the pallor of his face that it called forth almost universal comment.

A great weariness weighed down Ottorino's spirit, filling his heart with a dim consciousness of the futility of all ambition and all endeavour. Every effort to find a trace of the woman whom he had lost on the very threshold of liberty had been fruitless. Oblivious to the present and to the pompous scenes which surrounded him on all sides, he stared vacantly into space. Every now and then his thoughts reverted to that fateful night, and the chant murmured past his ears like the gentle sound of waves flowing 'neath the mesmerism of the moon, while all manner of vague suggestions rushed over him.

Innumerable candles in bronze, silver, and gold candelabras shed their unsteady glow through the purple dusk. In the dazzling effulgence, which confused and blinded the expectant multitudes, no one noted the gradual dying out of the light of day. The sky over the cathedral was without a stain, but the eminences toward the west, whose lovely slopes were covered by vineyards and olive groves, were hung with gloom. A huge and sullen cloud seemed to be gathering over the heights, and occasionally flashes and gleams of malignant flame burst from its bosom.

As the hours wore on the cloud deepened, obscuring the brightness of the sun, which had been hanging over the city like a fiery buckler. The distant roar grew

louder and more continued, and the blackness of night, of night without a star, fell far and fast upon the horizon.

The gaze of the assembly was now directed toward the background, whence slowly, two by two, in their funereal garb, the Dominican brotherhood filed in, forming a crescent around the chancel, which was as yet deserted.

Oceanlike now rose the chant of measured voices, but instead of the Kyrie Eleison the sounds of the hymn —

“Vexilla Regis prodeunt inferni” —

were darkly intoned by the Dominicans, and it seemed as if a pall had suddenly fallen over all the many-hued magnificence which had set the air alight.

On an ebony table, richly carved and inlaid with gems of great price, lay the fateful crown of Hohenstaufen, the crown with which Emperor Frederick had proclaimed himself King of Jerusalem in defiance of papal interdict and excommunication, the crown which he had successfully defended against three hostile pontiffs.

Manfred stood before the elevated platform directly beneath the station of the Archbishop of Palermo, who was to perform the ceremony. He glanced uneasily around the nave, while a shadow of profound displeasure clouded the clear and youthful brow. Where tarried the archbishop? Still the chancel was deserted, the chant had ceased, and every eye rested with expectant eagerness on the son of their beloved emperor, whose gaze flitted in mute interrogation from one of his councillors to another. They, however, appeared equally stupefied at the unaccountable absence of the archbishop, and there was a breathless, expectant hush. With sudden determination Manfred raised the crown from its repository, and, holding it aloft, faced the assembled thousands.

“In the name and omnipresence of the Triune God

and by the freewill of the people of Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily, I herewith place upon my brow the august emblem of our imperial house, descended unto us in virtue of the testament of our illustrious predecessor, Emperor Conrad IV., and our beloved father, now resting in the Lord, Emperor Frederick II., and by right of the treaties of Roger the Norman, bequeathing these lands unto Henry VI., Emperor of Germany."

A sheet of lightning at this instant covered the entire horizon, and the whole edifice rocked and trembled in the terrific reverberation which almost simultaneously burst with an appalling roar over the cathedral. The vast assemblage was for a moment swayed by an unearthly terror, as if doomed to immediate destruction. And the crown of the kingdom of Sicily had fallen from Manfred's grasp on the marble floor beneath.

Again a large sphere of fire shot fiercely through the heavens, lighting its track down the murky air and casting a disastrous and pallid illumination over the bloodless faces of the assembled thousands. Its lurid gleam revealed the form of a Dominican, who stood in the chancel instead of the archbishop. Throwing back his cowl, the severe Spanish features of Fra Domenico were disclosed to view. Pale but composed, he stood like one brought forth to suffer some terrific punishment, yet as one who despised its terrors.

A brief silence succeeded the sullen roar of the tempest, during which the monk peered through the clouds of incense, as if collecting all his energies for a dreadful feat. His eyes seemed the only living thing in that stony, ascetic face, as slowly they rolled over the vast assembly as if in search of one upon whose head the thunder of his anathema might descend. For a moment it appeared as if the friar intended to speak, but the words he had

begun to form died on his lips; his chest heaved with convulsive breathing, but again he was silent.

There was another brief pause of breathless suspense. An overwhelming awe had fallen upon the assembly, while with a livid, satirical smile the Duke of Altamura watched every movement of the Dominican, as if assured that no failure of his courage need be anticipated.

Manfred started as if waking from a dream, staring in mute wonder from the emblem of royalty which lay forgotten at his feet to the strange occupant of the chancel. Pale, dazzled, and staggering, as if under the influence of a sunstroke, the monk swayed in the pulpit and seemed about to fall, when his gaze lighted on the pallid visage of the Visconti. Raising himself with a sudden effort, he fiercely snatched the leaden seal from the bull which he held in his tight grasp. Then, while lightnings hissed from the ominous gloom of the clouds, and thunder belled in deafening echoes through the heavens, the monk in strangely discordant tones began to speak:

“In the name of Clement IV., servant of servants of God, Viceroy of Christ on the throne of the Apostle, and in virtue of the power vested in him by Jesus Christ and St. Peter, his successor, I herewith pronounce the anathema over Manfred, son of Frederick the Hohenstaufen, over Helena of Epirus, consort of the arch heretic, over their sons, their daughters, and their children’s children, over their friends, their adherents, their servants, and their hosts! I herewith expel them from the communion of the saints as heretics, standing without the pale of the Church. I forbid any one, under like penalty, to offer them shelter or refuge, drink or food; I withdraw from their guilty heads the benefice of protection and law. I forbid any friar to attend their sick-bed, or to receive their dying confession, and I deny them burial in conse-

crated earth! I herewith grant full absolution to any one whosoever frees the land from the reptile progeny of the arch heretic, and to this end I cut asunder, solve, and break the ties of obedience which have bound together subjects and king, and I declare null and void all treaties, public or private, entered into by Manfred, Count of Taranto, or by authority of his councillors, friends, or representatives! I further lay the interdict upon every church, cloister, chapel, or sanctuary in Apulia and Sicily; their doors shall be nailed up; no candle shall be lighted, no mass shall be sung, no prayer shall ascend to the throne of heaven, till the serpent brood of Hohenstaufen has been swept from the earth. May their name perish with them and their memory be wafted into oblivion for ever and for ever!"

After the last echoes of the anathema had died away under the vaulted roof of the cathedral, the Dominican remained for a moment motionless as a statue, like one benumbed by his own daring. Then, as if by secret command, every light in the cathedral was extinguished, and the dense gloom was lightened only by the almost incessant flashes from the angry heavens.

With a shriek that rang to the very summit of the edifice, Helena of Epirus had, after the last words of the Dominican, rushed to Manfred's side, and when Ottorino first recovered from the shock of the fearful catastrophe, he beheld king and queen locked in each other's arms.

For a moment the consternation in the cathedral was so intense that hardly a sound was audible in the vast area. Every one had retained their station as if rooted to the spot. Manfred had raised both arms as if to ward off a mortal blow from the head of his beloved queen. The brothers Lancia glared wrathfully and with suspicion into the green serpent eyes of John of Alifé, whose

bewilderment was either real or so well feigned that it defied the aim of suspicion. Conrad Capece had started up, sword in hand, but Altamura drew him back and implored him in a whisper to desist from violence, which would but aggravate the situation. In this way a few moments of dull and abject silence passed. Terror-stricken, speechless, and breathless, every eye followed the Dominican, the representative of the Church of Rome, the greatest power on earth, as his tall, sepulchral form disappeared in the background among the shrines.

Then a sudden tide of fear swept over the lowly murmuring multitudes, increasing almost to a panic in the funereal pall which oppressed them, and, as if pursued by the legions of some formidable unearthly foe, knights, squires, pages, and men-at-arms swept in one mad torrent over each other in the wild, unreasoning impulse of gaining the piazza, crushing beggars and noblemen, women and children, in fear-struck panic. As they did so, a tremendous thunderbolt descended solidly on the roof of the cathedral, as though a thousand walls had been battered down at one blow. With one despairing outcry of wild brute fear the masses rushed headlong through the portals in a struggling, shrieking, sweltering swarm, until no one remained in the gloomy, lightning-illuminated nave save Manfred and his queen, who found themselves face to face with Ottorino Visconti.

“Courage, King Manfred, courage! The pillars of the Ghibelline state still stand and the hearts of thy loyal subjects, who worship the son of their great emperor, cannot be turned at the wink of a fanatic monk!”

Manfred raised his right hand with a gesture of despair.

“Where are they? Swept away,—as if they had never been!”

"They will return, King Manfred. The thunder of the anathema has benumbed their senses,—give them but time and they will vindicate themselves gloriously. Drive the sombre shadows from thy brow, O king! Thou alone art their rightful sovereign, and victory will crown our arms!"

"I thank thee, Visconti," Manfred replied, extending both hands to Ottorino. "Thou wert kind to think of us, sorely distressed as thou art."

"I searched every sanctuary; thy kindness, King Manfred, opened every convent, gave me access into every cloister; I spared neither bribes nor threats. If the lady of Miraval lives, only He who looks through prison walls may know her place of concealment. Yet,—what is this trial compared with the calamity of this hour!"

"We cannot escape our fate! Perchance thou wilt find the woman of thy heart when we touch upon Apulian soil."

"I fear, King Manfred, an oracle speaks in thy words! When shall we start?"

"With the earliest. The fleet lies anchored at Manfredonia. The Saracens will cross to the mainland at once. We must crush the pontiff ere he can marshal his black hosts against us! I fear some foul play has been wrought on Count Cenci—and thus have our dreams of tranquil peace been shattered! But thou, Visconti,—when are we to meet again?"

"I have cast my lot with thine, King Manfred,—here is my hand!"

Helena of Epirus spoke not, for the anguish welling up from her heart, with the memory of the Dominican's terrible curse, choked her utterance. Without the tempest raged with unabated fury, and incessant lightnings seemed

to wrap earth and sky. The tramp of mailed feet resounded from the portals, and a moment later the Duke of Altamura, John of Alifé, and Reinald Aquino, Count of Caserta, strode toward the royal couple, closely followed by the brothers Lancia, Capece, and John of Procida, whose mien betrayed no feigned anxiety.

"We come from the palace, King Manfred," the latter exclaimed, rushing up to where Manfred stood, "thinking that you had thither preceded our anxiety."

The king bowed; a smile hovered on his lips.

"My lords, we thank you for your loyalty. Any tidings of import?"

"Charles of Anjou has arrived at Rome," replied the Duke of Altamura. "The Romans have proclaimed him senator, and Clement himself has decorated the Provençal banners with the cross, which is to mark the war of extermination 'gainst the Ghibellines of the South."

There was a deep hush, broken but by a half-suppressed sob, as Helena of Epirus clung almost hysterically to the man of her love and choice.

"Away!" Manfred replied, raising himself to his full height. "We temporize no longer! We count on your loyalty, my lords, in this hour of darkest gloom which has spread itself over the crown of Hohenstaufen, and bid you to our palace, there to receive your final orders!"

"We will be true to the king's Majesty — to the last," Caserta replied, bending low, then, preceded by the king and queen, the whole company hastened toward the portals of the cathedral. The storm had subsided with a rapidity peculiar to the South. The sun burned through a broad chasm in the cloudbank, and a pleasant breath of flowery perfume lingered on the purified air. Like one

roused from a frightful dream Manfred stared across the deserted piazza.

“One last glance at the glorious edifice wherein our imperial father sleeps toward the day of resurrection; may he intercede for us at the throne of the Almighty! Ah, why were we to be deprived of a parting benediction from our venerable friend, the archbishop? With lighter hearts had we departed from these dearly beloved shores.”

They were slowly traversing the piazza when John of Procida replied in answer to the king's query, spoken rather in soliloquy than in anticipation of a response:

“The Archbishop of Palermo died suddenly before the hour set for the coronation.”

BOOK THE THIRD

*"Se'l pastor di Cosenza, ch'alla caccia
Di me fu messo per Clemente, allora
Avesse in Dio ben letta questa faccia,
L'ossa del corpo mio sarieno ancora
In co del ponte presso a Benevento,
Sotto la guardia della grave mora."*

— DANTE, *Purgatorio*, Canto III., 124-129.

CHAPTER I.

CASTEL DEL MONTE

UPON a solitary conical hill rising above the long chain of the Murgie and overlooking the maritime part of the provinces of Basilicata and Capitanata stands Castel del Monte, the great Hohenstaufen castle of Emperor Frederick the Second. Stretching northward to Monte Gargano and Foggia dream the plains of sunny Apulia. Terra di Bari and Terra di Otranto fade into the horizon to southward, and the blue waves of the Adriatic from Barletta to Brindisi form the boundary to eastward.

The wide Apulian plains dreamed deserted in the glow of the westering sun, when a cavalcade of horsemen swiftly approached Castel del Monte on the road leading from Trani to Corato. The monotony of the green, undulating expanse, stretching from Andria to the banks of the Garigliano, was only now and then broken by an octagon watch-tower, a white stone wall, or queer looking circular huts, resembling tombs. They were crowned with a rough cross, and scattered over plain and morass, beyond which the river gleamed at intervals through rank verdure and stagnant marshes.

At the base of a hill which offered shelter against the otherwise unconfined gaze across the plains, the troop of horsemen halted, while their leader scanned the intervening space which lay between them and the imperial castle.

"Yonder it lies," said the foremost of the company, checking his steed and pointing to the summit of the craggy eminence, the pinnacles of which shone golden in the fast waning light of day.

John of Alifé had risen in his stirrups, craning his neck toward the point indicated by his companion.

"We cannot approach unseen over the plains," continued the speaker, in whom we recognize the Duke of Altamura, as, shading his eyes, his gaze swept the broad, undulating expanse, the horizon of which was bounded only by the towering heights of far-off Soracté, rearing its frosted silver pinnacles into the ever-deepening purple dusk.

"This mole-hill will screen us from sight till the sun has gone down," the chancellor replied. "Our horses' hoofs will not be heard in the grass."

"We must wait! Daylight is fading fast and Crivello's eyes are sharp."

Dusk had no sooner fallen than the Duke of Altamura gave the command to continue the advance, and silently the cavalcade cantered onward.

John of Alifé talked incessantly to his companion, as if to allay or to veil his own misgivings, for as yet the duke had not intimated to him the purpose of this singular expedition, though he had most strenuously insisted upon his society.

"For once our shrewd and stalwart castellan shall find himself trapped in his own wiles," Altamura at length remarked, during a lull in their conversation. "Verily he is playing his rôle so well that he believes in it himself! But I will be convinced of his treachery ere I deprive myself of so valuable a minister. The affair at Lucera is plausible, — and Crivello hath ambition!"

John of Alifé shrugged his shoulders.

"Thou canst not bribe the Moslem, duke, — thy gold buys but Apulians!"

"Ay! 'Twas less a point of bribe than strategy! John the Moor had agreed to close the gates of the city against the king; his Saracens were to rise in revolt; with Lucera lost to the cause, rebellion flaming from every hamlet, — the downfall of the dynasty was but a question of hours."

"Yet, — how different it befell," mused the chancellor, as if soliloquizing. "Manfred's march was one of continued triumph. Aware of the risk at stake, the king rested neither day nor night, and the brothers Capece, knowing the country, led the way by mountain paths more fit for goats than horses, avoiding Avellino, the Hohenburg's stronghold. It was sunset when we reached the castle of Atropaldo. Without consuming more time than scanty refreshments required, we continued in forced marches to Nusco, in the territories of Acerra; thence to Lavello and Venosa, and everywhere the king was received with great demonstrations of joy and affection. Thence we lost ourselves in the wilds of the Murgie, where in the Stygian darkness of a starless night, during a violent storm of rain, our small band almost lost its way. By good luck we met a huntsman who had been in the service of the late emperor. He conducted us to a little hunting-box, St. Agapito, in the woods of Incoronata, which offered shelter from the tempest and where we could dry our drenched clothes at a large fire, which Adenolfo Pardo, the huntsman, insisted on lighting, to welcome his prince."

Altamura made a gesture of disdain.

"May the foul fiend light a fire under him in return! But what of Lucera? I long to hear the tale that has mocked my ears like voices of the fiend."

"It was on the following morning," the hunchback, hoarsely croaking, continued. "We swiftly approached the Saracen city, riding closely under her walls. Manfred took off his helmet, that the Moslems might see his face and his fair hair!"

The chancellor paused for a moment with a sneer, such as a vampire might have given.

"But John the Moor?" the duke exclaimed, impatiently.

"From the turrets in response to the king's demand for admission there came the answer that the commandant was absent, having left strict orders to admit no one into the city. Manfred remonstrated with the archers of the watch, and no sooner had they recognized the son of their beloved emperor than they endeavoured to induce Marchisio, second in command, to give up the keys. This he refused to do, and the king was on the point of entering his city through a drain when the Saracens made a rush, burst open the gates, seized Manfred in their arms, and conducted him in triumph into the fortress."

"But John the Moor?"

"Ay! He was sorely ignorant of what had transpired at the gates, for Marchisio had been bound. Sitting in state in the council-chamber, surrounded by his chief eunuchs and emirs, he read to them Charles of Anjou's and the pontiff's promise of protection and reward, if they captured and delivered into their hands the usurper, as they styled the king. By his side sat thy Catalan, but his Christian spirit seemed sorely vexed, for his visage bore a gloom, savouring little of the blessed. Then John the Moor proposed an auction for Manfred's head, and lively enough the bids were going, when in stepped a strange knight, his dark cloak drawn over his visage. He,

witnessing the last bid, quickly advanced, and, striking the floor with the point of his sabre, exclaimed: 'What! A lousy hundred florins for the head of so great a king? Ten thousand florins I bid, hear ye, hungry knaves? Ten thousand florins, full weight!' 'Whoever thou mayest be,' says John the Moor, rising, 'thou art a noble knight, and here is my hand.' 'Thou art quite right concerning my quality,' the knight declared, grasping the proffered hand, while he dropped the cloak from his face, 'for I am Manfred, thy king and judge! Seize the traitor and suspend him from the battlements in plain view of the whole city, that in death at least he may enjoy the lofty station he coveted in life!' And thus high perched, John the Moor, thy friend and ally, ended his brilliant career," the chancellor concluded, with an ill-concealed sneer.

A withering glance of scorn flashed from Altamura's eyes.

"Then Malerizi was not warned,—or the warning reached the one it was least intended for."

"The warning reached the king."

"But how? Through whom?"

"Whether by design or accident, — thou knowest best! Crivello was sent to Castel del Monte as reward for some dark deed we have not fathomed yet."

"Crivello a traitor? What hath he to gain thereby? Can his lot be more splendid as subject of the king than as follower of mine? Have I not given him license to cut and slash to his heart's content, without even asking an account thereof? Have I not with lavish hands piled riches and plunder upon him, and even allowed him to confess part of his sins once a year on Good Friday? What more can he want?"

"Perchance he aspires to a loftier title; perchance he

tires of coupling his fortunes with the sinking star of Altamura."

"Sinking star! Not thus spoke the wizard, who promised me the crown of Italy! Onward,—ever onward,—rising until in its mad career it casts the stars from the firmament and envelops nature in chaotic darkness that shall know no light save what emanates from myself,—for this I dreamed in the days of my boyhood."

"And yet your Highness's dreams may be doomed to pass into nothingness,—or have you not heard of the destruction of the entire Provençal fleet? Who warned Drogo, the high admiral? There is scarce a craft left, and the men drowned like rats."

"It was the storm."

"It was fate,—dark, inscrutable fate! No nobler fleet ever sailed from the ports of France. There is a dark power at work,—treason, perchance, in our own ranks, like a poisonous spider, spreading its net around us! We must destroy the centre of the web ere we are drawn within its fateful meshes."

"My plans are laid," the duke replied, after a brief pause, during which the cavalcade was swiftly approaching the castle. "Didst thou not insinuate that Crivello is carrying on a traitorous correspondence with the king by means of carrier-pigeons, keeping him informed of all that happens?"

"Nay,—not with the king," the hunchback sneered, while he gave his gaunt neck a twist to ascertain that their retinue was not sufficiently near to overhear their discourse, "nay, not with the king,—with a certain nun."

The duke started up as if a viper had stung him, while his hand clutched the hilt of his poniard.

"By the fiend, repeat thy speech! The sound tickles our ear!"

"I said not that his messages are of tender import, — the lady is too fastidious for fickleness."

"We require no oracles, — the proofs, — the proofs!"

"Yonder at Castel del Monte thy Catalan sits in state. If thou art eager for the proofs the hour will fetch them!"

"That it shall, ere another night has gone! The king is to be at Castel del Monte to-morrow at sundown! I will despatch a messenger to the Catalan, purporting to come from Sidi Yussuff, who shall say that I, the duke, demand admittance into San Germano, but the emir not only refuses this permission, but craves my immediate recall, else, since justice be denied him, he will take it at his own hands. Now if Crivello be the traitor thou wouldst have me believe him, he will forthwith despatch his pigeons, clutching at the opportunity of tripping his enemy. The warden is a creature of mine, and will privily admit me without the usual alarums. At early dawn I shall sit in the tower of the winds with my good falcon Gorebec, who never failed me, and whom luckily I thought of taking into the field."

The duke glanced over his shoulder, beckoning to his side a horseman in the dark green habit of a falconer, who rode a short distance away between two men-at-arms.

"Hast thou kept my falcon well fed?" he asked, while stroking the bird's head, after he had removed the cap, which he immediately readjusted.

"He is well in flesh, your Grace," answered the falconer.

"We shall soon require a feat of him; until then, see that nothing ruffles his temper. Send Scrivezzo to me, — I would have speech with him."

The individual cited appeared at once by the duke's

side, and now they continued their advance, while the chancellor, crafty as he was, regarded the duke with a mixture of wonder and approbation, for his subtle and strange device was altogether too much to his own liking for him to offer objections, even had he entertained them. In subdued tones Altamura confided to the bravo the part he was to perform in the impending drama.

At last they reached Castel del Monte, as the moon was rising above the eastern hills. The duke guided his companions to a postern gate, where his subdued knocks were answered by a swarthy Calabrian, whose countenance would have served as ready passport of admission into the renowned band of Ghino di Tacco's bravi. After a mute greeting, a silent nod from the warden admitted the company into the castle, while at the same time Scrivezzo, with many loud and boisterous protestations, demanded admission at the main gates, which, when opened, brought him face to face with some six or eight men-at-arms, of whom he requested an immediate interview with the castellan.

The practised features of the Catalan, which the arrival of a special messenger, whose purpose he knew not, had slightly disturbed, resumed their equanimity during the men-at-arms' oration, but when he delivered to him the pretended message, their habitual gloom returned. The Catalan's eye fell with searching suspicion and uneasiness on the crafty features of the messenger, whose dislike for his person was probably guessed by him, and when the latter, after having delivered himself of his commission, asked leave to depart, as the goal of his journey lay distant, the castellan denied his request.

"The road thou speakest of," he said, "lies through fen and forest and wastes; thy horse is spent and so are those of thy men; moreover, I have no warrant to per-

mit any one who enters the castle to leave it. Therefore I most humbly beseech thee to take up thy lodging with me until I can obtain the proper command."

"Proper command!" remonstrated Scrivezzo. "Mean you that you will force me to delay on my road, bearing, as I do, a message from the great emir?"

"I must do my duty," replied the Catalan, with a look of much significance, "and the time is not far when thou wilt more fully understand my motives!"

Ere Scrivezzo could offer remonstrance, two Catalans who had been waiting the signal from their leader seized the disguised envoy and hurried him from the apartment across a gallery, whence they descended by a dark winding stairway to a chamber barred and grated, which he was to inhabit for the night. It was on the following morning that the castellan ordered those of his Catalans who ranked foremost in his esteem to join him in his morning repast, and Scrivezzo, who had been sent for to share therein, made the best of the company which was thrust upon him. The viands spread before them looked inviting enough to have silenced even more serious scruples than those entertained by the bravo's empty stomach. While carefully scanning the apartment, he pretended to be deeply interested in the conversation of the castellan's men.

Waiting the arrival of their commandant, the company had seated themselves around the plentiful board of their host. Wild boar, roasted whole, haunches of venison, and roasted crane composed the chief viands, while several beakers of choice red wine served to loosen the tongues, and nothing was wanting save the presence of the host himself, who, as Santuzzo, one of his subordinates, stated, had retired to dictate some despatches. Scrivezzo gazed in a rather hungry way at the table,

thence with a sigh at the window, where his attention was forthwith caught by a pigeon with something white tied around its neck starting from the tower across.

The bird flew at first in a straight and steady line to southward, but suddenly it whirled around, panting rather than flying with its wings, and dived down to the lake. Scrivezzo's curiosity was excited, and, gazing upward, it was some moments ere he discovered a hawk so high in the air that it looked like little more than a black spot. But it was descending in its fatal gyrations, and, as if aware of an inevitable doom, the pigeon, after a few vain flutterings, made a last despairing soar. But soon the rapacious claws were in its back and the ruthless beak in its brain.

Scrivezzo had no time to note what further befell the luckless bird, for at this moment the much desired host, Don Crivello, made his appearance. He entered with so much agitation and anger visible on his countenance, that the disguised bravo's alarms were all renewed.

"Who is it that presumes to fly a hawk without my permission?" the Catalan asked fiercely of Santuzzo. "I have just lost one of my best carrier-pigeons, which was seized by a hawk launched from yonder tower, and the letter I aimed to despatch by it is probably lost."

"It is Ugolino, the under-falconer. I have warned him many a time that he displeases your lordship with his untimely pranks," replied the individual spoken to, bowing low in deference to his chief. "But the hawks are too well trained to have eaten the pigeon, therefore undoubtedly the letter is safe."

"Go and bring the rogue this instant before me, and by St. Anthony, if the seal is but breathed upon, I will have him sawed in twain as a warning to all such insolent, meddling villains who keep no discipline," exclaimed the

castellan, whose agitation was so extreme that Scrivezzo inwardly smiled.

Santuzzo departed, apparently with very good-will, on his errand, and, striving to resume his equanimity, Crivello took his accustomed seat at the table. Some time elapsed, and though the Catalan continued greatly disturbed, his subordinates did ample justice to the repast. The crane had not been assailed yet when Santuzzo reappeared. His naturally insidious and at the same time ferocious countenance displayed its characteristics now so legibly that a child could not have mistaken them. He held in his hand an open letter, which he presented to Crivello.

"Señor, it was not the under-falconer, as I imagined," he said, with a satanic leer, "but a fellow who came lately into the castle, and who has dared to amuse himself with flying the king's hawks. Him I surprised perusing your letter to a certain high-born lady."

"Certain high-born lady? Thou canst not — thou hast not — read it, too?" stammered Crivello, turning deadly pale, as he stretched forth his hand to take the epistle.

"Your lordship knows I am as great a fool about monkish learning as a monk were about soldiery," replied Santuzzo, turning the letter in his hand like one who holds some uncommon instrument, the use of which he knows not.

"True, — so thou hast often said," observed Crivello, breathing hard, as if relieved from a weight on his chest. "But did not this prying villain read it to thee?"

"By the rood, — I gave him no time," replied the Calabrian.

"How, my most excellent and faithful Santuzzo, thou didst not in thy passion at his insolence strike thy dagger into him?" exclaimed Crivello, hurriedly.

"I caused him to be instantly seized, but I thought it behooved me rather not to forego your lordship's judgment," said Santuzzo.

"Where have you left him? In whose company? Take him at once to the nearest tree," said the castellan, with increasing agitation. "Doubtlessly he is some Provençal spy, — else wherefore should he read my letter?"

"My lord, he is a free man, and we are in the king's domains! As such he must be fairly adjudged ere he can be put to death," replied the malicious warden, secretly enjoying his superior's confusion.

"Think you so? Free man, — fairly adjudged? We will make short work of him. In the king's absence we sit in his stead! Bring him hither gagged, and I will adjudge him fast enough," Crivello concluded, fiercely.

"He is even now waiting at the door; your lordship need not delay your repast," said Santuzzo, stepping eagerly to the portal, which he threw wide open. The burnished casques and spears of the duke's men-at-arms met the startled gaze of the banqueters, as they filed into the chamber in rapid succession, while from the centre of their opening ranks, with rapid and fiery step, his eyes blazing with wrath, his fine nostrils quivering, his cheeks pale with concentrated passion, strode Ferrando, Duke of Altamura.

The suddenness of his entry, his disordered locks waving like black serpents beneath his scarlet hermin cap, which contrasted strangely with his sombre garb of sable velvet, might have struck terror into men who had less reason to dread his wrath. As it was, Crivello stood fixed and pallid as stone, but his Catalans started up, uncertain where to turn in the unforeseen dilemma, while several murmured an exorcism to the fiend.

"Ha, Crivello, you are then resolved to send me to the

gibbet for my impudent interference! What, then, does treason merit?" thundered the terrific master. And, turning with the most courtly and blandishing irony to the company of Catalans, he added: "Pray be not disturbed, good and honest gentlemen, for we are so well assured of your loyalty that we even presume to ask you to assist us in pronouncing what judgment befits this ungrateful traitor, who, not content with fanning into flames more furious the war which is upon us, desires to blacken our good name with foulest insinuations, to array even the king against us, his most faithful and loyal servitor, and to sow suspicion between ruler and subject."

As he spoke the duke snatched the paper from the passive hand of Crivello, and read aloud passages from the intercepted letter to his no less patient auditors.

And Crivello had indeed been inspired by an evil genius when he penned this epistle. Stung almost to madness by the deadly insult offered to him by the duke during the assault on the Torre del Diavolo, he had carefully screened his feelings from his master, vowing inwardly a vengeance as black as the duke's sins, with which he was so well acquainted, merited in his estimation. After having foiled one after another of the duke's designs by timely information to those in position to prevent their execution, the Catalan had now penned a letter to Francesca, whose abode since that eventful night had been unknown to the duke. In this letter Crivello advised the lady to warn the king of the dissatisfaction among the Saracens of San Germano, owing to the proximity of the Duke of Altamura, and suggesting the immediate recall of him who was more rapacious than a harpy, more cruel than a tiger, more insidious than a viper; further to advise the king to secure the person of a certain sorcerer who had assisted the duke in his fiendish devices,

and who even blasphemously pretended to foretell the future.

The duke paused for a brief space of time, as if musing over the double meaning of the last sentence, then he turned with a terrible laugh to the men-at-arms in the chamber, who had listened in breathless dismay.

“Now, señors, if all this be true, deem you that so great a sorcerer ought to be mistaken? You have all heard the contents of this letter, and a noble answer I can give you to its treason and calumny! Are you not here in my presence, in my power,—one and all,—here in this strong castle, surrounded by my soldiery? Yet I offer you all a friendly welcome, safe lodging, good cheer, and to-morrow at dusk we will continue our march toward Capua, where you shall share in honour alike and profit if our first stroke against Anjou prove successful. But why keep we our honoured company standing? Seize yon traitor and away with him!”

For a moment Crivello's courage gave way before the duke's dreaded visage.

“Mercy,—my lord, my master,—mercy!” he yelled, prostrating himself before his relentless judge.

“Mercy, thou merciless traitor? Hast thou ever shown mercy to thy countless victims whom thou hast sent to await thee in the darkness whither thou goest?” replied the duke, spurning the wretched culprit with his foot as he endeavoured to clasp his knees.

At this juncture Santuzzo darted forward and seized the Catalan by the doublet, while his eyes rested questioningly on the duke.

“I would humbly propose, my lord,” he said, with his satanic leer, “that the death of hanging be spared to him

as concession for the services he has rendered your Grace in the past."

The duke cast a quick glance at the castellan's intercessor.

"So let it be! I am always happy to oblige my friends. Let him be taken to the top of the tower and precipitated through the trap-door. And when you have done with him, saw me his carcass in twain and set it up like a shark's jaw on the bastion to let people know I loved not nor approved his cruelties."

At this terrible sentence all vestige of sense deserted the wretched instrument of the duke's guiles and intrigues. He reeled, but, suddenly recovering himself, he rushed with the ferocity of a wild beast upon the duke, who but for his watchfulness and great agility might have paid the forfeit of his judgment. Crivello's steel was met by a dozen blades which flashed from their scabbards, even his own men turning upon him, and it was apparent that the fated castellan was fighting not for victory, but for a less cruel mode of death.

"I will give thee one chance to die at least as a man-at-arms," the duke thundered, amid the clash of steel and the wild oaths which accompanied each thrust and parry. The men-at-arms lowered their weapons, while narrowly watching their doomed victim, who, as yet unharmed, stared with ashen pale face and bloodshot eyes at his terrible judge. "Name to me the hiding-place of Lesina's daughter, for thou knowest it, — and I will yet be merciful."

For a moment dread silence filled the chamber.

"Name to thee the hiding-place of the nun thou hast raped from the altars of Christ, — the wanton who followed the trail of her own infamy by fastening herself on thine? Seek her in the hovels of her kind, — thou

knowest the opportunities! Or if thou miss her there, inquire of the fiend with whom thou hast shared her — ”

“ Upon him — upon him! Hack him to pieces! ” roared the duke, in maddened frenzy, while with a mad leap he rushed into the midst of the recommencing fray, which brought him face to face with the castellan. Like two infuriated tigers they sprang at each other, and so fast and furious followed thrust and parry that, much to their chagrin, the duke’s followers were compelled to desist, not daring to approach within sword-length of the combatants. The Catalan’s more powerful stature was counterbalanced by the duke’s serpent-like agility, which caused him to evade the furious onslaught of his adversary. Tables and chairs had been overturned in the heat of the fray; three times they had made the round of the chamber, without the duke’s gaining a positive advantage over Crivello, at the point of whose weapon despair sat and guided his thrusts. Suddenly his foot slipped in the viands which had been overturned, and he had hardly touched the floor in his fall ere the duke’s steel pierced him through and through. Crivello’s sword fell from his nerveless grasp. Altamura’s aim had been true, for from a ghastly wound in the castellan’s heart the black blood spurted over the floor, and with one last gasp he sank back dead amidst the fragments of the banquet and the spilled wine. The duke, after one last glance at his former servitor, wiped the dark sweat from his brow, then cleaned his bloody weapon on his victim’s doublet.

“ Take him away,” he turned to Scrivezzo, who rushed forward with the avidity of a wild beast, fearful lest its prey should be snatched from it. “ Best to the trap-door! Let him rot in noble society.”

Then throwing himself with a lofty air into the raised seat so lately occupied by the fallen follower, the duke

filled a goblet of wine to the brim, and, with a smile which seemed full of joviality and heartiness, drank to the health of all his honoured guests and the company of Catalans in particular.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHRINES OF ANGELO DEI LOMBARDI

LIKE a plague-stricken land, where brother fears brother and friend dreads friend, where children turn against parents and lovers eye each other with secret distrust, brooded the broad Apulian expanse. The papal interdict had withered life and joy; no sanctuary was open, no mass was sung; the sick perished without the sacrament, new-born babes were deprived of the baptismal fount. The beggar monks had increased as a plague of locusts; their black bands swarmed through Southern Italy, promulgating the decrees of the pontiff and paralyzing the last remnants of loyalty to the imperial house of Suabia. Everywhere sullen, glowering faces met the gaze, and superstitious fear aided to accomplish what the Provençals had not so far been able to achieve,—the downfall of the dynasty, and with it anarchy, rebellion, and lawlessness.

Such was the character of the country which Manfred and his trusty band traversed on steeds fleet as arrows, wont to race against the sand-storms of the Arabian desert,—on the highroad from Lucera to Castel del Monte. The king longed for reunion with his beloved queen, whom he had not seen since she had left Palermo under the armed escort of the Count of Angalone. The revolt of Lucera, so narrowly averted, and the stringent measures required to quell in the bud any second attempt,

emanating from misguided ambition, to play the almost impregnable stronghold into the hands of the Provençals, had detained Manfred much beyond his own expectations. Accompanied by the tried and proven friends of his father, the brothers Capece, Galvano Lancia, the lords of Frangipani, Acerra, and John of Procida, he was hastening southward. While the Saracens of Sidi Yussuff held the ramparts of San Germano against the furious onslaughts of the Provençals, while the Count of Caserta defended the passes of the Garigliano, all was well. With his superior forces Manfred hoped to terminate the war with one successful stroke, the more so as the Romans had turned their starving allies into the bleak wastes of the Campagna, tiring of the rapacious rabble, who plundered alike the territories of friend and foe. For Charles of Anjou treated the states of the Church, the patrimony of St. Peter, whose successor had blessed his banners, with the same rapacious impartiality as if they had been the lands he was yet to conquer.

Ottorino Visconti had accompanied Manfred to Lucera, and had remained near the king until the revolt of John the Moor had been quelled. Then the anxiety for Helena di Miraval, of whom he had not discovered the faintest trace during their forced inland marches, had not permitted him to tarry longer. With the promise to rejoin the royal forces at Castel del Monte, the Lombard detached himself from the suite of the king in order to continue unhampered his search for the lost one, a task made hitherto almost impossible, while hampered by an armed retinue. For this reason he had caused Canaletto and the Lombard contingent to attach themselves to the Apulian squadron which Manfred was leading into the Basilicata. He himself set out alone, bearing a heavy heart and oppressed with dreary forebodings of the future.

It was a bright but sultry morning, when a solitary horseman was seen winding that unequalled road from whose heights, amid fig-trees, vines, and olives, the traveller beholds, gradually breaking upon his gaze, the gray, massive walls of San Angelo dei Lombardi, a feudal town situated in a southeasterly direction from the city of Benevento. The vicinity of the old capital of Norman Italy, which was so soon to assemble within her gates the parliament of the realm and the united Ghibelline forces, had prompted Ottorino to search for Helena di Miraval's unknown dwelling-place in regions which the duke of necessity must traverse within a brief space of time. The surmise that he would not hie away his kinswoman beyond his own possibilities of reach seemed to bid for better success than the Lombard's hitherto erratic researches had been crowned with. That Helena was not in the train of the duke he had assurance positive. Before leaving Palermo he had also ascertained from a bravo, who deemed it nothing amiss to serve two masters, that a high-born lady, whose identity his informant could not reveal, had during the night been conveyed under strong escort on board a ship, ready to start under secret orders for some Apulian or Calabrian port.

While the surmise that the lady of Miraval might be detained in one of the numerous feudal castles along the coast seemed not altogether vain, Ottorino, after carefully weighing every consideration in favour of or against the latter supposition, concluded that the duke would hardly expose his kinswoman to the dangers arising from the sudden landing of a hostile fleet. He was resolved to continue his search in the duke's trail, more firmly convinced than ever that the woman he loved would not be far from her jailer, whose vigilance no message to himself had been allowed to escape.

Ottorino did not pursue his path with the traveller's customary eye of admiration, nor was the scene which spread before him one very animating or inspiring. All was silent, void, and hushed, and even the light of heaven reflected a gloomy, oppressive glare. Of the few cottages by the roadside some were closed up, some wide open, but all seemingly inmateless. The plough stood still; the distaff plied not; there was a darker curse upon the land than the black plague, which was to hold its deadly harvest in these regions a half-century hence: it was the papal interdict. Now and then some forlorn straggler, clad in the coarse garb of the Calabrian peasant or the gloomy vestment of a friar, crossed the deserted road, staring with livid and amazed countenance at the solitary horseman, then crossing himself and vanishing beneath some roof, from whose entrance peered the sullen visage of its starving owner.

Impatient and well-nigh despairing, Ottorino at last spurred his horse toward the gates of San Angelo dei Lombardi. He had partaken of no food for twenty-four hours; his strength was almost exhausted and his senses reeled under the relentless rays of the scorching noon-day sun. He almost fell from his horse as he reached a hostelry just outside the gates. His repeated calls eliciting no response, the Visconti dismounted and, fastening his steed to an estrada in which the door, half-torn from its hinges, stood slightly ajar, he entered, but he paused as soon as he had set foot on the threshold. Huddled together on the barren floor lay a company of aspect so little inviting, a medley of beggars' crutches, poniards, clubs, and filth, that Ottorino preferred the pangs of hunger and thirst to the questionable comforts awaiting him in that society. Turning almost as quickly as he had entered, he remounted his steed and was about

to head for the moat, when he sighted a dark procession emerging from a gate which he had not earlier observed, which swept by him and disappeared in the valley beyond, — a procession of featureless spectres, wrapped in long, shroudlike robes, hymning in solemn dirge the imploring line, "*Miserere — Miserere.*"

Prompted by a sudden impulse, the Lombard resolved to follow. The spectral procession turned down a green lane remote from the road, and disappeared behind the portals of a cloister which for the first time revealed itself to Ottorino's gaze. Beyond the cloister, half-hidden in the green, were the vineyards and olive groves, villages and convents of the Principato, while behind him San Angelo dei Lombardi reared its towers, battlements, and spires to the glowing horizon.

At the base of a gently sloping, verdant hill stood the cloister, whither the Lombard had been attracted by the strange procession which had vanished behind its massive doors of bronze. They were left ajar, as if in their haste the nuns had neglected to bar the portals, once the barriers between the world and a sphere no layman's foot dared profane. Permitting his steed to graze under the wide-spreading branches of oaks and plane-trees which surrounded the sanctuary, Ottorino entered the refectory of the cloister. It was deserted. Through a high and narrow casement, sunk deep in the massive walls almost directly above the place where he stood, an errant ray of sunlight streamed into the purple dusk.

While scanning his surroundings in quest of some living object, Ottorino perceived a chapel close by. Through the painted windows gleamed faintly, dimmed by the noonday sun, the light of tapers. Ottorino stared aghast. Who dared defy the interdict and offer divine adoration before altars profaned and deserted? Approaching with

noiseless steps, he entered the sanctuary and beheld a single nun kneeling in silent prayer before a duskily illumined shrine. Impressed with the desolation and sanctity of the place and the touching sight of this solitary and unselfish bride of Christ, Ottorino, forgetful of thirst, hunger, and fatigue, obeyed but the mastering impulse of his heart; he knelt unseen by the nun, while his lips offered up a fervent prayer for one ray of light in the gloom which oppressed his soul.

As he rose, somewhat relieved, the nun rose also and, startled by the sound, turned her head. But no sooner had their eyes met than with a wild, delirious shriek they rushed into each other's arms.

"Ottorino!"

"Helena!"

For a time they remained locked in silent embrace. Neither spoke, each dreading to break the spell which had once again woven its magic around them; only their eyes and hearts held silent converse.

"Oh, Helena, Helena," Ottorino at last spoke, in faltering accents, "have I lived to gaze again into your eyes, — to touch your hand, — to hold you in my embrace? By what miracle are you here? Has Heaven returned to me the treasure which I had sought so long with dread and anguish? Helena, speak! Is it you, or is it some mocking phantom? Are you alone? How pale your face! Speak, my Helena, speak, for my senses reel." He paused, closing his eyes. His face was very pale.

"Ah, Ottorino, it is I, Helena di Miraval, — your Helena indeed, — not a pale and mocking phantom! But you live — you live, Ottorino? You have returned from the waves in which I saw you sink beside the murdered boatman? Tell me all, — tell me how it befell, — it is like a dream, I cannot grasp it!"

"Not of myself let us speak, but of you, my Helena, you whom I sought heartsick and despairing throughout the length and breadth of this desolate land! But why this garb, the habit of the cloister? You have not — Helena —"

He paused, the unspoken thought driving the last vestige of colour from his face.

"I am still of the world, despite this garb," she replied, with a smile, "though sadly changed since we last saw each other."

"Fairer you are and lovelier, my Helena," replied Ottorino, passionately. "But now tell me, my life, how came you here? Why this gown and what is your mission in this God-forsaken abode? Or is it — a prison, in which you have but liberty to roam at will? Speak of yourself, not of me!"

Helena raised her eyes to those of her lover, while her hands rested upon his shoulders.

"It is like a miracle, — a dream, — I can hardly grasp it, — we both living, standing face to face and hand in hand. What have I not suffered since that dreadful night when I saw you disappear beneath the waves, and felt myself snatched up by the arms of masked and muffled men and carried — I knew not whither. When first I woke from my swoon the moon shone brightly on the waves, over which a swift craft bore me toward some unknown goal. My first glance fell upon dark, scowling faces, — they told me you were dead. I remember little more till the Stygian darkness of night was rent by incessant lightning; crashing peals of thunder and the deafening roar of the tempest drowned the voices of the terrified seamen, who saw their craft at the mercy of the elements. I prayed but for death. The frail shell, containing ten lives, suddenly capsized. The men fought

madly for even a straw to cling to, and no hand was stretched out to save the woman. But a galley plying close by picked up my well-nigh spent and lifeless body; the duke's men perished in the waves. The noble Genoese inquired not as to the quality, name, or rank of her who enjoyed the hospitality of his craft, but when in parting I insisted upon learning to whom Helena di Miraval owed her life, he reluctantly revealed his name: Fiesco di Lavagna."

"No nobler name echoes through all Genoa! But then, my beloved — then?"

"At Naples the commandant of the frigate conducted his charge to a convent, where I remained till I learned of a company of pilgrims ready to set out for the shrines of St. Michael of Angelo dei Lombardi. When the tidings spread of the interdict the officiating monk forsook the shrines before which he had been kneeling, forgetting in his frenzied panic to extinguish the candles before which you found me, not knowing where to turn, where to go."

After Helena di Miraval had concluded her account, neither spoke for a time. Long and closely they remained in each other's embrace, and while he kissed the tears from the long, silken lashes, on which they trembled like morning dew on mystic night-viols, Ottorino sought to read the untold history of suffering and anguish in the depths of the eyes, which held his own with their subtle spell.

"It was the magic of these dear eyes that guided me across the plains, hither, to your side in this of all hours, my Helena, hither, where I should have been, to shield you, to guard you, to guide your steps to safety and to freedom. But this air is oppressive and I am faint. Let us seek a resting-place where a gentle zephyr sways the branches of the oaks."

"There are olives and provisions stored beneath a shrine, where the pilgrims in their haste relinquished them," Helena replied, with a look of deep concern at her lover's pallid countenance, and, taking him by the hand, led him to the indicated spot. Ottorino's strength and spirits quickly revived during the repast, of which Helena but scantily partook, and only in obeisance to his urgent entreaties.

For the next hour the lovers abandoned themselves wholly to the delight of reunion, while new reminiscences called forth ever new transports of joy and happiness.

"And now," murmured Helena, her head resting on Ottorino's breast, "now that our fate has so wondrously brought us together —"

She paused, averting her blushing face.

"Now that we have so miraculously met," said Ottorino, filling up the silence, "would you say further, that we should not part again? Trust me, dearest, that is the wish which animates my heart. And yet, — must I be the one to tell it? I tremble for you, beloved, until we shall have reached the boundaries, beyond which the name of Altamura dies like a meaningless sound."

"Where shall we go, Ottorino?" Helena faltered, after a brief pause.

"Ever northward, starting with the rising moon. Benevento will be our next resting-place; ere dawn we shall reach her gates."

"Benevento?" Helena exclaimed. "There we shall meet the duke. He will destroy us both."

"Fear not, my love," Ottorino reassured her, as he supported her trembling form. "The Archbishop of Benevento has ever been the Visconti's friend; under his roof you will be as safe as under the emperor's, and

there you will remain until I return from Castel del Monte."

"But why must we part again?" she faltered, her eyes seeking his in mute entreaty.

"My place is by the side of Manfred; to guard him, the last of his glorious house, 'gainst treason, be it in council-hall or on the field of battle," Ottorino replied. And, as Helena made no response, he continued: "Your silence speaks to me your heart, and I thank you, dearest, with all the love and fervour of mine. But after my return I must find shelter for my treasure other than the old witches' city, and while the mountain passes remain free I will place you in Canaletto's care, who will conduct you safely behind the walls of Ghibelline Florence. There I will claim you as my own when the cloud now obscuring the horizon has faded away."

"I would follow you to the end of the world, Ottorino," Helena said, glancing up into her lover's face, "but while you remain at Benevento my place is by your side!"

Ottorino's gaze rested with unspeakable tenderness on the adored face.

"You cannot remain at Benevento, dearest," he replied, caressing her dark hair. "The fate of the kingdom may be decided under her very walls. Should I fall—you would be left alone without protector at the mercy of a horde of fiends!"

She shook her head half-smilingly, half in defiance, but her face was very pale.

"I would die with you," she spoke, with quivering lips.

There was such earnestness in her tones that for a moment Ottorino could find no words to reply, then he clasped her softly clinging form to his heart and kissed the sweet pale lips again and again until their sweetness made him forget present and future.

Evening came at last. The burning calm was followed by a breeze, breathing of life, and in the sky sailed, as if it were wafted by the gentle zephyrs, the evening star. The lifeless silence of the plains now began to be broken by a variety of sounds, wild and sad enough in themselves, but softened by distance and not ill suited to that declining hour which is so fit an emblem of the decline of life. The moaning of the shepherds' horns, the low of the folding herds, the scream of the vulture, wheeling home from some feast of carnage, the howl of the jackal, venturing out on the edge of dusk, came with no unpleasing melancholy upon the wind. The hour of departure was at hand.

Ottorino gently assisted Helena into the saddle of a jennet which he had procured at a near-by monastery, and much cause for merriment the singular spectacle of a knight of the empire travelling in company with a nun would have afforded to any chance passer-by. But the road they chose was as deserted and lonely as if they were traversing a plague-stricken province. They were approaching a wood, skirting a valley on either side, when a black pedestrian suddenly overtook the Lombard and his companion, and, glancing at the twain, hastened past with almost inconceivable rapidity. Helena had scarcely noticed the phantom, whom she perhaps thought some Moorish slave making his escape. But Ottorino instantly whirled his crossbow, which on this occasion he had for precaution's sake added to his armament, from his shoulder, carefully set the bolt, and in the twinkling of an eye the rapid messenger had fallen to the ground with a mortal stroke.

Helena's wonder at this extraordinary act of violence on the part of her lover only subsided when in the slain she recognized the duke's swift African runner, Zem.

Then the peril from which Ottorino's quick and circumspect action had delivered them dawned upon her in its whole extent. Closely she kept by the side of her lover, whose trusty steed, refreshed by the noonday siesta under the shady oaks, kept even pace with its fresher long-eared companion. Soon the shrines of San Angelo dei Lombardi had vanished in the silvery mists which enshrouded the Apulian plains, and every step brought these two nearer their goal, nearer their fate, nearer the walls of the ancient city of Benevento.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADES OF MIDNIGHT

IN one of the secluded chambers of Castel del Monte a silver lamp with three branches was burning, diffusing a sweet perfume through the room. The solitary occupant of the apartment was walking up and down in a meditative manner, with head bent low; from time to time he made a gesture with his hand as if to throw something off his mind; at last he paused before a table, unbuckled his sword, and hung it against the wall; then he uncovered the inkstand, took a sheet of parchment, dipped his pen in the ink and, finding that it wrote too thick, began to mend it; but as he turned it and re-turned it, cut it and recut it, his brain began to whirl. In a few moments he recovered himself and, suddenly remembering what he was about and what he intended to do, threw away the pen-stump which he had spoiled, took a new one, dipped it into the ink in a determined manner, and started to write. Again he paused, leaned back, and gazed at the ceiling, deliberating how in anticipation of impending events he should begin his letter; but after remaining in this position for some time and receiving no inspiration, the letter made no progress. At last the Duke of Altamura took up a great mass of manuscript which was lying before him, and, throwing it roughly behind his chair, sprang to his feet; then striking his forehead with

his hand, he began afresh to pace the room, talking to himself all the time.

"The poisonous breath of evil has gone forth and withered the flowers of life,—away, foolish vapours! Let my star shine forth in the impending night that is to precede a clearer morning."

With a derisive smile he reseated himself to his task, resuming his letter to the Senate and people of Rome, while the phantoms of Guelph and Ghibelline, of Pope and emperor, of intrigues and war, flitted through his burning brain. He heard not the door behind him turn on its hinges, nor was he aware of another's presence, until, raising his head from the parchment, pondering how most subtly to prepare the Romans for that which must so soon befall, he noted in the polished bronze mirror before him the indistinct outlines of a form which, whether a spirit or in the flesh, was there to no good purpose. With a fierce outcry he sprang to his feet and, quickly turning, hurled the inkstand with such force in the direction of the intruder that it missed him but by a hairbreadth, striking the wall behind him and breaking into a thousand fragments, while the dark fluid was spilled over the rich tapestry and the costly Persian carpet.

A low, derisive laugh mocked the duke's frenzy.

"Thou wilt encounter phantoms in plenty ere thou startest on the decline of thy career, Duke of Altamura," croaked a mocking voice, while he from whose head had been so narrowly averted the dark baptismal slowly emerged from the shadows.

"What evil demon brings thee here, Caserta?" growled the duke, a sinister light flaming in his eyes. "And taunt me not with fear of that of which thou art sorely ignorant."

"What evil demon brings me here?" replied Reinald Aquino, Count of Caserta, throwing back his cowl and disguise and revealing his pale, haggard countenance. "I know of but one — and thou art he."

"Indeed! Though from thy tones I should judge thou seekest rather a confessor than associate. Again, — what brings thee here?"

"Am I not welcome?"

"A traitor is never welcome."

"Art thou mad, duke? Traitor, — hast thou not counselled the deed thyself?"

"Ay — though I have counselled, thou art the perpetrator. Posterity will not deprive thee of that glory!"

"Death and perdition, — dost thou recant?"

"The Duke of Altamura never recants! What I have begun that I will see to an end. Thy presence here is a menace! What seekest thou in Castel del Monte?"

"Seek — seek?" growled Caserta.

"I am neither oracle nor wizard!"

"Thou knowest, Satan, — she is here?"

"For this, then, thou didst abandon thy trust?"

"And if so, — wilt thou prevent me?"

"If I find it expedient to do so, — I will!"

"Then let me remind thee, Duke of Altamura, — thou art not yet at the end of thy goal. The bridge of the Garigliano is still held by Ghibelline forces! I have been deceived, belied —"

"Hast thou met a prophet in the desert, or wert thou favoured with a revelation?" sneered the duke.

"Ay! I did encounter one of the species of lying prophets — Pietro del Vico, the thrice-damned villain, revealed to me, ere his treacherous lips grew cold in death, the identity of those cooing turtle-doves in the cavern."

Altamura turned pale.

"A most wondrous fable! The rogue deserving of tenfold damnation cheats himself into the belief that his lying death-bed confession will straightway carry him to paradise. Where did Del Vico meet his doom?"

"At the pass of Casalto. A spear-point pierced his intestines,—in his confession he named thee, Duke of Altamura, his accomplice!"

"He was an execrable villain in life,—he is an execrable villain in death."

A mocking laugh broke from the duke's lips as with a sneer he continued:

"Was it I who caused thee to behold thine own disgrace in the grottoes of Proserpina, or another, afraid lest the flames of purgatory would burn his black soul to a crisp did he not unload upon another a share of his sins ere he crossed the dark river?"

"Then let San Severino gainsay him, the prompter of a deception dark as the blackest midnight."

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

"Thy scruples are belated. I shun the testimony of a carcass."

"Hast thou slain him, too?" gasped Caserta, receding in speechless amazement.

"Vitality is a cursed habit," the duke replied, with a cruel smile. "Why cling persistently to this form of clay?"

Caserta stared for a moment in silence, then he flew into a rage.

"Thou unutterable traitor and fiend! And I struck her down at parting,—her mute eyes my silent accusers in the face of heaven."

Caserta covered his passion-distorted features with his trembling hands, while he gasped for breath.

"By the fiends of doom, what have we here? A ranting monk or a hysterical neophyte, who raves and whines and brays his shame to the silent stars? Thou hast deserted thy post upon the lying testimony of a varlet who fears to face his judge in the beyond,—thou hast jeopardized the cause to which thou art bound by oaths which not even one of thy kind dares to break. By the five wounds,—thy madness goes too far!"

"I will have certainty—certainty at every risk," replied Caserta, advancing with pale, drawn features, "before the last fateful step which must for ever sever the cause of Reinald Aquino from that of Manfred, the Hohenstaufen!"

"What hast thou in common with the dynasty? Art thou not an Apulian? Art thou not one of us? Whose cause have I taken up? Is it not thine? Thou hast pricked my flesh with the sharp thorn of thy hatred, and now thou quakest before the shades thou hast evoked!"

"Is our cause so weak that a breath from a woman's lips may overthrow it?"

"I mean to save thee from thyself! The taunts of a dying rogue have made thee oblivious of thy pledge,—caused thee to steal hither like a milksop lover who sings to his inamorata in the moonlight. Where is thy lyre, Reinald Aquino? The moon is rising without,—I will conduct thee to a spot where thou mayest croak lustily till cockcrow, striking the chords with the point of thy stiff Spanish beard. How now? One madness is worth another!"

Caserta coloured to his very temples, and a hot reply hovered on his lips, but he restrained himself with an effort.

"Speak, then," he growled, with downcast eyes, which dared not meet the duke's, "I listen."

"Thou must return at once, — this very hour! I will aid thee in thy desire, but I will guide thy steps. Manfred will arrive this very night. Should thy presence be discovered —"

He paused with a meaning glance.

"How long the hours will drag."

"What matters an hour more or less in the brief eternity of our existence? Yesterday at the cradle, — tomorrow at the grave, and then, — as if it had never been."

"Were it but all over after death!"

"What matters it to thee? Thou canst come in no worse society over there than thou hast kept here."

Apparently submissive, Reinald Aquino bowed in silence to the duke, who noted not the fiendish leer in the eyes of his departing visitor, and soon unbroken silence reigned again in the chamber of the high constable of Apulia.

It was nearly the hour of midnight, when the form of the black penitent glided out of a dungeon under the castle, in which from time to time deep groans had been audible, and, passing a number of sentinels, finally vanished down a long unfrequented gallery. No inquiry or challenge was addressed to him, for the superstitious sentries believed him here on business of the king's, thus authorizing his entry or egress, and the general fear entertained of midnight monkish apparitions prevented idle curiosity to a great extent.

The wizard continued upon his way until he came to a spiral stairway, descending which he lighted a torch and took a deliberate survey of the chamber below. The first object on which his light gleamed was the figure of a page couched on a bed of straw. So white, so motionless, he lay that but for the apathetic stare which he fixed

upon the intruder it might have been thought that a marble statue had been bedded there.

"Raise thyself, Francesca, raise thyself!" the black penitent whispered. "The hour of vengeance is nigh! Canst thou reveal to me where the poisoned wines are concealed? The light hurts my eyes. Speak, where are they?"

Without replying a single word the disguised page raised her thin white hand and pointed to one of the archways. The wizard immediately entered it, making his way to a circular excavation, which at one time seemed to have served the purpose of a wine-cellar. Snow was piled around it, and in the snow lay glistening a number of bottles of scarlet crystal, finely cut and sealed with a rich silver ornament. Others of exactly similar make and colour, with this difference, that they were sealed with lead and were fewer in number, lay at some distance from the heap.

Approaching the former, the muffled monk took an instrument from his pouch which was contrived for the purpose, and deliberately wrenched out all the corks, without in the least injuring their fine seals. Muttering strange words to himself, he then drew an exactly similar number of the leaden corks, transferring one of the more precious ornaments to each as he proceeded. When he had completed the whole number, he carefully replaced all in the exact form in which they had lain in the snow, and retired.

"Francesca," he said, as he returned to the page, and again the latter mechanically raised herself and listened.

"I heard the Moorish hags, before their demise, tell thy unkindly lord that thou alone of all their disciples knowest the antidote to this poison. Thou wilt not betray it?"

The page laughed soundlessly, covering her eyes with her hands as if the light troubled them, and with a profound sigh and extinguishing his torch the magus left the dungeon, mumbling :

“Thou shouldst at least have had enough sense spared thee to know thyself avenged,—to have witnessed thy destroyer’s agony and doom!”

Winding to the summit of the stairs, it seemed to the sage that something like a shriek resounded from below, but he dared not pause to satisfy himself, and continued upon his way. His steps had scarcely died away when the form of a crouching human being was seen moving closely along the dark corridor, pausing at intervals and timidly glancing about, then gradually nearing the spiral stairway, which it ascended with soundless, feline agility.

Once in the upper corridor the figure moved slowly along the dark stone wall, now and then seeking covert in a niche or behind a pillar, until it had reached a landing, where all further progress seemed barred, for the walls converged at this point, and not even the semblance of a door or aperture appeared. The crouching figure slowly pushed its thumb along a ledge of stone until it had found the desired object, then, pressing a spring, the walls noiselessly parted. For a moment the unknown paused and carefully examined the mechanism on the inside, as if to convince himself that egress was not cut off, then he cautiously glanced around.

Only the occasional glare of far-off lightning on the western horizon lit up the apartment. The intruder dared not move but between the flashes, which succeeded each other at considerable intervals, in order not to stumble against some obstruction. The apartment was of considerable circumference, and in a remote corner he

espied a couch, upon which the Duke of Altamura tossed in restless, dream-disturbed slumbers.

A fiendish smile gleamed on the intruder's face as he cautiously drew nearer and nearer. Suddenly he paused. Was there indeed some one to anticipate, to foil his vengeance? But he saw no weapon, no steel in the hand of the drooping form, who seemed bent rather on soothing the disturbed spirits of the sleeper; for his couch seemed haunted by visions which he in vain endeavoured to dispel; cold perspiration stood beadlike on his forehead, and broken accents of terror escaped from his half-closed lips. The page was gazing with looks of mingled love and terror upon the restless sleeper, as if the silent wish could break the evil spell which enthralled him. Creeping stealthily closer, the muffled figure in the shadows crouched down like a tiger before the spring. The page had straightened himself to his full height to remove the dark waves of hair which, falling from beneath his cap, had well-nigh brushed the sleeper's head. Whether they had, or whether the pressure of the nightmare softening permitted him to breathe easier, — the duke suddenly opened his eyes. A piercing cry rang through the chamber; with a frenzied oath he sprang from his couch; a long keen blade gleamed in the lightning which rent the heavens; there was a pitiful wail, a fall, and with bloodshot eyes and foaming lips Altamura glared at the dark, prostrate form.

"Die, damned spectre, die!" he screamed, like a madman. "Wilt thou never cease to haunt me? Light! Light!"

Rushing past his dying victim, the duke shook the door with a frenzied effort, then, recollecting that he had himself barred it ere he retired, he almost tore away the lock in mad fear.



“‘BY THE ETERNAL GOD, I HAVE KILLED HER!’”

"Light! Light!" he roared, emerging upon the threshold, and his frantic cries at last roused the guards. The tread of speeding footsteps resounded from every direction, and the duke snatched the torch from the hands of the first man-at-arms who reached the chamber.

"Varlets! Is it thus ye guard your lord and master? I will have ye flayed like useless carrion!" he yelled, and, closely followed by eight or ten spearmen, he rushed back into his chamber just as the heavens were rent by a blinding flash of lightning, closely followed by a deafening peal of thunder, which shook Castel del Monte to its foundations.

The duke's hand went to his forehead.

"Are all the fiends of doom loosed upon me to-night?" he gasped. "Must it ever and ever appear, to freeze the blood in my veins, — dead, as it is, and damned?"

He paused and staggered, stooping over the prostrate form.

"What deception of hell is this?" his voice rang out, like the shrieks of a demon.

The torch fell from his nerveless grasp, and with a choked outcry the duke sank over his murdered victim.

"By the eternal God, I have killed her! Francesca — Francesca — my love — speak — stare not at me thus — Francesca — ah! this, too — this, too! It is too much, — it is too much!"

With trembling hands Altamura removed the dark hair which covered Francesca's face like a protecting veil; once more her bosom heaved, a faint smile hovered on her lips, then the blood-stained fingers which had quivered around the wound in her heart grew rigid; the arm fell heavily by her side, and, like a child falling to sleep, the hapless victim of the duke's licentiousness passed the barriers of the dark beyond.

For a moment or two the duke gazed like one benumbed at the lifeless form of the woman who had given him true love in return for merciless cruelty; then a wail like that of an animal wounded to the death pierced the gloomy stillness of the death-chamber. From the duke's lips oozed bloody foam, and his eyes assumed the glassy stare of the maniac; then with a despairing outcry he fell over the body of Francesca, who in unconsciously saving his life had given up her own, to find that peace in death which had been denied to her in the world.

While guards and attendants rushed terror-stricken in search of medical aid, the muffled intruder, who seemed for the time to have been cheated out of his own revenge, slowly retraced his steps through the aperture through which he had entered, and which noiselessly closed behind him.

"Thou hast slain thy guardian angel, Altamura," whispered the Count of Caserta. "Fare thee well — thy star has set!"

On the spiral stairway he met a black friar who was mumbling to himself, seemingly unaware of another's presence.

"How strangely the world whirls round and round and takes no rest," the monk said, in half-audible whispers, but the perturbed and wild expression of his countenance changed into one of self-possession and calm as he observed that he was not alone.

"The duke is in agony," the muffled stranger said, "swooned unrepenting and unabsolved."

"So let him perish, — it were even justice!" replied the monk. "But his hour has not yet come!"

"Thou speakest like an oracle!"

"The mills of the gods grind slowly, — yet the dead will rise and sit in judgment."

"Ay, — thou speakest truth, friar, for even now death hath struck down a nun of the severest order."

The stranger's eyes flashed from beneath his mask upon the monk, who replied in tones cold and imperturbed:

"A nun of the severest order?"

"One wretched and guilt-lost, — Francesca's body lies yonder, — haste thee, friar, lest the devil win the race for her soul."

With these words the muffled cavalier was about to pass the Dominican, when the latter, with a gesture of his raised hand arrested his steps.

"The passes of Ceperano are lost, Reinald Aquino; thou at least wilt not cheat the fiend out of his own."

"Who art thou?"

"What matters it to thee? Time and death solve all mysteries."

With an oath Caserta bounded down the stairs, while the Dominican hastened to the duke's chamber. Attendants in wild confusion ran hither and thither, without knowing whether their master was dead or had only swooned.

A few moments later the clang of horse's hoofs was faintly audible under the windows of the duke's chamber; but the sound was quickly lost in the ever increasing roar of the approaching tempest.

CHAPTER IV.

CONVIVIUM REGALE

THE arrival of Manfred and his retinue at Castel del Monte had been delayed nearly a whole day, for it was not until the evening of the day following the dire events narrated above that the fanfares of his heralds announced the approach of the king at the gates of the imperial Hohenstaufen castle. His sojourn in the ancestral halls of his house was to be brief, for Charles of Anjou was reported to have started southward on his crusade, as he styled his tour of conquest.

The sun had gone down behind the hills of the Basilicata and the purple dusk of evening spread its shadows over the Apulian plains. The royal court was assembled in the octagon saloon, which had often rung with the merriment of revellers. The guests had grouped themselves around the king: Galvano Lancia, Marino Capece, John of Procida, Frederick of Antioch, the Counts of Angalone, Falconara, and San Germano sharing one side of the oval board, while the Duke of Altamura, John of Alifé, Count Cerro, and Giovanni Frangipani occupied the other.

The worn and pallid look of the king excited and absorbed the general attention. His unusual pallor could hardly be accounted for even by the excessive sultriness which was just beginning to yield to the fresher evening

breezes. The Duke of Altamura also wore an aspect of perturbation, more especially so when his eye fell upon a knight who had been noticed for the darkness of his garb and his closed visor. The duke's inquiring glance elicited from this personage a significant nod, which gave him back his spirits, so that despite the unsteady gaze of his eyes his manner gradually assumed something of a wild gaiety.

Manfred sat for some moments absorbed in deep meditation, listening abstractedly to the compliments which the duke addressed to some of the guests.

"Some wine! I am faint!" he cried, at last, with an involuntary shudder which the duke remarked not without satisfaction.

Attendants sped away to execute the order, and soon the chief butler returned with a basket, containing a number of scarlet flasks buried in the fresh snow of the Abruzzi. Almost at the same moment there appeared in a remote corridor the tall form of the Dominican, who remained unseen in the shadows, his gaze riveted upon the assembly in the cabinet.

Manfred, engaged in conversation with the chancellor, John of Alifé, was not aware of the monk's presence until Marino Capece whispered a few words in his ear, whereupon he glanced up.

"What desires the friar?" he demanded, his knit brows revealing the impending storm. "For the black vultures of Clement we have set aside but one place in our realm where they may dwell with impunity: the branches of the trees."

"It is not a common friar, King Manfred," interposed the Sicilian. "Some hold him a wizard, of whom great and wondrous things are told."

"One monk is no better than another," John of Alifé

objected. "The Dominicans are a seditious set, — it was a Dominican who pronounced the anathema."

"The more, then, we admire his courage for putting his head into the noose that shall shorten his breath!" exclaimed the Duke of Altamura. "Seize the monk in the name of the king; these seditious grow dangerous."

The duke rose from his seat and pointed with outstretched arm to the Dominican in the outer corridor, but before the men-at-arms could execute his order the dark-robed knight had approached the royal dais.

"If it please the king," he spoke in low accents, "perchance the friar hath important tidings."

Manfred turned to the guards.

"Bring the Dominican to our presence."

"The friar is mad, King Manfred," Altamura interposed. "Have we not testimony of his stirring up rebellion in your capital and delivering seditious harangues to the rabble?"

"We will have the monk before us! We will ourselves judge whether he be sane or as mad as some of us who go about unshackled," replied the king, with sudden impetuosity.

"What needs it, King Manfred, when we call to memory the strange gambols the would-be wizard has played upon us all?"

"Thus it shall be and thus we will learn who is lord and sovereign in our dominions," said Manfred, with increasing severity. Then with a profound and gloomy sigh he glanced around at the dark-robed knight, adding:

"Knight, we may depend on thee! Take the guard, thou hast our command."

"It may arouse a sudden commotion in the castle, which we have not the power to quell, — with the excommunication upon us," remonstrated the duke, still bent on carry-

ing out his intent. "The minds of the soldiery are a strange compound of loyalty and superstition."

"On that point this knight may exercise his own discretion, — he has that quality, and we trust him," replied Manfred, with a sigh, which the duke interpreted favourably, the more so as the dark knight answered his inquisitive gaze with a second hardly perceptible nod. His attention was now centred upon the chief butler and his retinue of cupbearers. The dark knight had made his exit from the sala, and the duke watched the butler so intently as he opened the scarlet flasks that, although this personage kept his eye fixed on him for some signal, he stirred not until he had observed that his own goblet and that of the chancellor were filled from the bottles sealed with lead, and that of the king and the other guests from those sealed with silver.

The company had quieted into momentary silence when the king raised his goblet.

"Victory for the eagles of Hohenstaufen!" he exclaimed, and, rising to their feet, the assembled guests repeated the toast. Then Manfred drained the goblet to the unbounded satisfaction of the duke, whose eyes sparkled with insane triumph as his gaze darted from cup to cup, to make certain that none of those loyal to the Ghibelline cause had shunned the draught he had prepared for them.

But all with emulous zeal had drained their goblets to the last drop.

Filled with his dire inward joy, the duke now rose to return the royal pledge and to drink the health of the king. Altamura drained his ample goblet so heartily that he even tilted it and clinked the gold, to show his friends the zeal which he took in the affairs of the kingdom. Then, anxious to make certain of his victims, he imme-

diately turned to the chief butler and commanded the goblets to be refilled, in order to drink to the safe and speedy termination of the present war.

But where tarried the black knight and the monk? Had the Dominican confederates? Manfred cast uneasy glances at the door through which they were to enter, turning almost immediately to the chancellor with the question uppermost in his mind, regarding the reported rupture between the Pope and his ally and the latter's expulsion from Rome. The question was inadvertently spoken loud enough to reach the ears of the Duke of Altamura, who made reply in the stead of John of Alifé.

"Surely," he said, while a derisive sneer flitted over his pale features, "there is still hope for the king's Majesty, for in the end no one can gainsay that the son of Frederick has at all times been a most exemplary and obedient son of the Church, even from the day when, leading the pontiff's snow-white charger by the bridle over the bridge of the Garigliano, he thereby acknowledged himself his servant and vassal for all time."

Manfred glanced up, his eye falling with an indescribable and terrible expression on the duke, and all the marble stolidity of the latter's visage could hardly turn the lightning of that fierce inquiring glance. Just then the monk was espied on the threshold of the chamber between two spearmen of the guard.

All attention was immediately centred on the friar, and when he faced that splendid assembly, drawing himself to his full height without any sign of reverence or respect for the august presence in which he stood, his visage perfectly bloodless, but instilled with terrible though silent passion, an awe fell upon those present like that which falls upon the souls of men when a tempest gathers and pauses ere it bursts.

The Duke of Altamura now seemed the only one untroubled by the gloomy guest's appearance, if guest he might be called. He gave the monk a nod, which the latter seemed to comprehend, for a fearful smile lighted his wan and gloomy features, then the friar turned slowly to the king, whose dark contracted brows boded little good for the unwelcome intruder.

"Thy purpose here, friar, and name it quickly!" Manfred said, while his breast heaved with suppressed emotion. "We hardly know which to admire the more, thy insolence or thy daring."

The Dominican remained imperturbed.

"I have come in an evil hour, — the messenger of justice, of retribution. But before I speak in mine own behalf, King Manfred, command thou to be brought into thy presence one waiting without, who is denied admittance in thy name by the guards of the Duke of Altamura."

"What, — art thou not alone?" Manfred exclaimed, aghast. "Has thy whole brotherhood infested this abode?"

"It is a woman," the Dominican replied, sedately.

"A woman!" the duke reëchoed, bursting into an immoderate fit of laughter. "A Dominican friar journeying with a woman? *O tempora — O mores!* Hath she youth and fairness, friar? If so, grudge not her sight to this noble company, in whose understanding eyes she may find favour."

"Where is the woman thou speakest of?" Manfred inquired, in tones almost harsh with excitement.

"The black knight, in whose charge I have left her, craves thy direct command to admit her, or permission to break through the opposing guards."

"Who dares to exercise authority in this castle without obtaining orders from us?" Manfred exclaimed, fiercely.

"The Catalans of the duke bar the entrance to the hall," the Dominican replied, coldly.

"Messer Antonio, go and command in our name and on peril of death that none refuse admission to the black knight and the woman, whoever she may be, — we shall ourselves judge of the fitness of her presence," said Manfred, with a violent impetuosity which drowned the words in which Altamura began to utter a vigorous protest, and which sent the officer of the court speeding upon his errand with unwonted and almost undignified despatch.

"Even so!" said the duke, with an indifferent shrug, contradicted by the glitter in his eyes. "I meddle not with women, whether they journey with monks or on their own account. But," he continued, leaning back in his chair, while his eyes darted lightning shafts at the friar, "since I am high constable of the kingdom, I may, even in this august presence, presume to question what doctrines those are thou preachest, monk, which stir the people to disloyalty, rebellion, and other mischief!"

"My doctrines, Duke of Altamura, or, as thou stylest thyself, High Constable of Apulia, are matters beyond thy province. The Church alone has the power to decide upon them and the king alone the right to question."

The Dominican's answer seemed to reconcile Manfred somewhat to his presence.

"And what are thy projects, monk?" said the king, turning to the friar. "If they be good, we will ourselves aid thee in their execution, thus refuting the pontiff on his own ground."

"My projects, King Manfred," the Dominican replied, while his stature seemed slowly to grow and to expand, "are to root out from the soil of this beautiful land the

serpent brood of Hohenstaufen, to free the air from their accursed presence, to make the very heavens waver over their heads, to crush them back into night and chaos. My purpose is to hurl destruction on the head of the last of their race and his accursed progeny."

"He is mad, — stark mad, — a madman at large," exclaimed Frederick of Antioch, after a brief pause of profound astonishment. "What shall be his chastisement, King Manfred?"

"As a madman let him go unchastised," the king replied. "He has a prophet's boldness and perhaps his mission. And his warning reminds us well, duke," Manfred turned to Altamura. "We did intend visiting some of the dungeons which have recently been crowded with strange malefactors, to do some acts of grace and mercy while we may. Among the rest we are resolved to learn whether the daughter of Lesina is your prisoner or your guest."

The duke was startled by the directness of the question.

"A kindly power hath most generously taken care of her," he replied, not without betraying some slight alarm, while his face turned to livid hues. "Our Lady grant she may make no mischief wherever she is at present, for she hath at times a rebellious temper. But with the king's leave," the duke continued, with an effort to quit so dangerous a ground, "I may question this friar further concerning his mission, which he proclaims with such fearless insolence. Thou shouldst have better assurances, monk, than visions to support thee in so dangerous a task as this which thou announcest," the duke said, turning to the Dominican, whose gaze had been attracted by the stir and commotion in the anteroom.

"This very night I had one in which I will rather confide than in the spears of ten thousand," replied the

Dominican. "Methought I beheld a putrid carcass breed a snake, which came forth and stung the murderer, and straightway he swelled and burst, and it was given to me to crush the reptile even with mine unsandalled feet. And the carcass resumed its life and became lovely and fragrant and imbued with youth, as one whom you have all seen, — and shall see no more."

"Well spoken, friar! But the prophets of old, whereof we read in the Scriptures, showed visible signs of their divine commission, — and where are thine?" replied the duke, mockingly, with a look which the friar understood and returned with one of mingled loathing and triumph.

"What sign can be more manifest," he spoke with slow and terrible emphasis, "than that Ferrando, Duke of Altamura, the assassin more cruel than Cain, the butcher more remorseless than Nero, the infidel more unbelieving than Iscariot, stands before me unblasted by the lightnings of heaven?"

"Monk, — mad though thou art, — there is malice in thy ravings, which may distinguish thee from thy fellow maniacs," said the duke, kindling with a passion which the friar's epithets were likely to rouse.

"I appeal to the protection of the king, — promised to me by this sign," returned the monk, with a bitter smile, holding high the royal signet.

"What is this, friar? Is this hallucination — madness? How camest thou by this ring?" exclaimed the king, staring aghast.

"Let it suffice for the present that I have it!" the Dominican replied.

"Be it as thou sayest," Manfred returned, with fathomless gloom in his tones, while consternation was depicted on every countenance. "And since thou deemest this friar a prophet, duke, — honour him as such!"

"But thou cravest my proofs?" the Dominican continued, with studied and ironical slowness, and it was evident that by his connivance the arrival of his companion and the black knight was delayed. "And I answer, Duke of Altamura, — am I not at liberty? Have I not compelled the dungeon walls to yield up myself and another, who has confided to me his mission, — and have I not summoned hither one who shall lift the veil from the dark mystery of death, and shall bring conviction, proof, and certainty from beyond the grave?"

"What wouldst thou say, mad friar? What proof, what conviction dost thou rave of?" exclaimed the duke, convulsively clutching his dagger, while he shrank from the fierce gaze which the monk turned upon him.

Ere the latter could make reply the form of the dark knight was seen entering the saloon, accompanied by Messer Antonio and a veiled, girlish figure, that swayed like a storm-broken reed from side to side. Immediately upon taking his station next to the king, the knight raised his visor, and stood revealed to the amazed and fear-struck eyes of the duke as Ottorino Visconti. Quicker than words can tell he had removed from the head of his protégée the long white linen hood and veil, and a cry of terror and amazement rang out at the sight of Leila, the mad girl. Clutching her by the arm and drawing her forward with gentle force, Ottorino endeavoured to rouse her from the stupor which lay heavily upon the drooping girl, spent and worn from the prison air.

"Leila, — Leila! This is the reward I promised thee for thy tears and sorrows: vengeance on the murderer of thy lover, vengeance on the slayer of Enrico! Look around and tell us who he is!"

There was a brief pause of breathless and terrific suspense, during which Leila scanned the group with frantic

eagerness, until her eye fell upon the face of the duke, aflame with demoniac passions and fear, then with a shriek which seemed to rend the very walls she pointed to him.

"He is there! He is there! Oh, give me justice, great king, and slay the murderer of Enrico!"

And with astonishing swiftness she flew to Manfred's chair, throwing herself frantically at his feet. The duke started up like a wild beast roused in its lair, and was in the act of springing upon the hapless girl, when the king, rising from his seat, placed himself before her, thundering with a countenance awful in its mixture of anguish and fury:

"Assassin, — thou art judged! Advance but a step and with mine own hands — guards, level your spears!"

Ottorino's sword instantly gleamed over the kneeling form of the Moorish girl, and the Dominican advanced toward the duke, who stood rooted to the spot as one paralyzed.

"And now hear me, Duke of Altamura," spoke the monk, his eyes gleaming with supernatural and insane fierceness, his countenance that of an ancient prophet, thundering the curses of heaven upon the evil-doers, "Heaven is at last weary of thy crimes, — earth and heaven alike, and the hour of doom, of vengeance, of retribution, is at hand. Assassin and betrayer! Within this hour I command thee to render up thy detestable soul to vengeance, cursed by angels and demons alike, and on the answer to this summons do I stake my claim to be held as a prophet of God or a lying impostor of the fiend. This ring, King Manfred, was given to me by Crivello, the duke's emissary to Lucera, who, after gaining admission into the city, was to have roused her defenders to revolt. His sins weighed heavily on the Cat-

alan, and thy Saracens proved true. Nevertheless thou art sold, betrayed, vanquished! Not by the weapons of thy foes on the field of battle, but by treason in thy council, in the ranks of thy soldiery. Not to lift the cause that is doomed beyond redemption do I reveal to thee this arch treason, King Manfred, but that thine own cup of anguish may be the more bitter in the knowledge that those foremost in thy trust have sold thee and thy kingdom. Urban, my pledge is fulfilled; my soul is free!"

"Villain — hast thou poisoned my drink?" suddenly exclaimed John of Alifé, his colour changing to livid hues as after a momentary struggle and vacant grasping in the air he staggered from his seat and was supported by some of the guests, who began to feel some alarm on their own account.

Like an unrelenting judge whose lips have pronounced the doom of the condemned, the Dominican towered silent and immobile among them, while the Visconti's eyes were fixed on Altamura.

"My own heart is on fire, — of this deed at least I am not guilty!" stammered the duke, in whose veins the direful potion had begun to work. Then he turned fiercely upon the Dominican.

"Hellish sorcerer, — hast thou poisoned me?"

"Nay, your Grace, — I but changed the leaden stoppers for silver ones, — an honourable distinction befitting your rank and merit," replied the Dominican, with a terrible smile.

"Bear me away, — the poison consumes my heart, — bear me away," groaned John of Alifé, while with one last fearful glance at the duke he added, "This is justice."

Then he sank senseless into the arms stretched out to receive him.

"What means this? Lift the veil from this terrible

secret, friar, — we doubt neither thy mission nor thy summons,” exclaimed the king, pale as death.

“Nothing more or less, son of Frederick, than that Ferrando, Duke of Altamura, intended to poison thee and thy councillors and deliver thy kingdom to Anjou without one stroke of sword. San Germano has been stormed by the Provençals; Sidi Yussuff, the emir, whom thou didst deny reparation for the duke’s insult, — Sidi Yussuff and two thousand Saracens cover the ramparts with their bodies. The Count of Caserta has deserted his post, and through the abandoned mountain passes of Arcé and Ceperano the invading hosts are marching upon Benevento, the keys of which city Anjou expects to receive at the hands of him whom the judgment of Heaven has struck down at last.”

“And is this truth?” gasped Manfred.

“As true as that thou and thy kingdom are doomed!” replied the friar.

“An antidote — an antidote! Where are my two apothecaries? A thousand florins for either! Bring them hither — I am burning up!” exclaimed the duke, who had fallen on the floor in wild convulsions.

“Those thou callest are dead,” replied the monk, “and, while disdaining absolution, they send thee glad greetings and hope to meet thee in the doom whither thou goest. Dost thou recognize me, Duke of Altamura?”

The Dominican stepped closely to the dying man, and, throwing back his cowl, revealed features so stern and pallid that the duke for a moment closed his eyes. Suddenly he raised his head above the floor, peered into the friar’s face, and uttered a wild shriek of dismay.

“Dost thou recognize me, Ferrando?”

The duke gasped for breath.

“Lorenzo!”

"Yea, — even he whose life thou hast wrecked, whose happiness thou hast destroyed, whose love thou hast turned into hate," the Dominican spoke, with unutterable meaning. "I am Lorenzo, who has tracked thee down step by step, — I am Lorenzo, whom thou didst force into this funereal garb to save from worse than death the head of her who had brought him into this world. I am Lorenzo, who has thwarted thy plans and upset thy designs, — hither, girl! See how the murderer of thy Enrico dies!"

Leila instinctively obeyed the summons of the Dominican, who had once more covered his head with the cowl, but when her eyes fell upon the duke's distorted features she uttered a despairing shriek, "Enrico — Enrico!" and sank lifeless into the arms of the friar, who bore her to a couch, where he placed her as gently as he would a sleeping child.

"Thou poor loving dove," he said, while his hands softly closed her lids, "mayest thou find him who was so ruthlessly torn from thy loving arms, and though thou didst not depart in the faith, — *requiescat anima tua in pace.*"

After having performed this last office, the Dominican vanished from the hall and was seen no more.

The duke raised himself on his elbow and stared at Ottorino Visconti, who had approached him.

"Where is the lady of Miraval?" he hissed in the face of the Lombard.

"Safe and beyond thy power! This parting assurance thou mayest take on thy dismal journey!"

"Helena safe? Ah! Then all is lost! The poison burns in my entrails," cried the duke, vainly attempting to rise. "But vengeance — vengeance, ere I die! Seize the sorcerer! Ah! Let it at least not be said that Alta-

mura died like a dog! Help — help! Helena! Francesca! Ah! She, too, she, too, — I slew her, I! — An antidote! Keep off these fiery forms! — The dark one, — he in the glistening armour, — damned spirit! Canst thou find no rest in the grave, though I tore thy breast with twenty poniards? Keep him off, — keep him off! He tears out my heart with his burning pincers! All those ghastly faces, — Crivello, too, — flames, — flames, — my eyes are on fire! Help — Francesca — ”

And the Duke of Altamura fell back lifeless, his head striking the hard mosaic of the floor.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOROSCOPE

It was nearing the hour of midnight.

Deep silence reigned throughout Castel del Monte, only the monotonous tread of the sentries broke the intense stillness. The waning moon shed a pale spectral light over the plains beneath, over olive and carob trees and the fantastic shapes of the underbrush. Spectre-like beneath the canopy of night's dark pall the white Apulian towns stretched toward the distant horizon.

Two men slowly ascended the spiral stairway leading to the heavily merloned tower of the astrologer. A lamp which he could shade at will shed its unsteady glow over the table on the platform, before which, bent over hour-glass and chart, sat Ben Hussein, the Saracen. His head rested in his hands, and so absorbed was he that he failed to note the approaching footsteps of the two men who were just emerging upon the platform. Raising his head, the Saracen swept the heavens with a glance so long and searching, that the purpose of his presence could not be an object of doubt or conjecture. Then his gaze returned to the running hour-glass, thence to the mystic symbols of the visible planets as they were drawn upon the chart according to their position in their respective houses. He studied parallels and degrees and verified the correctness of his calculations with the aid of a second

chart, which seemed to serve as a supplementary survey of the mighty overarch. Again he watched the stellar hosts, as to the tones of their own music they paraded by the throne of the Most High, unchallenged save by Him; occasionally he reversed his hour-glass, though more frequently he made new diagrams, showing the changes of position of the most influential bodies of night, relatively to each other or to the favourable or unpropitious signs upon which so much depended. Nor did his eye once weary nor his zeal lag, while unseen his nightly visitors watched every gesture, bending toward the chart, as if endeavouring to decipher the mystic characters. At last the foremost of the two softly touched the Saracen's shoulder. Ben Hussein betrayed no sign of surprise.

“What say the stars, Ben Hussein? What will the end be?” spoke a low voice, which yet betrayed by its trembling tones the anxiety of the questioner.

The astrologer threw up both hands.

“I am only the interpreter of the stars, the messenger of the Supreme Power, King Manfred, — not a prophet.”

“Whether messenger, interpreter, or prophet,” Manfred replied, “it is the burden of that which thou bringest that is of chiefest account. Hast thou compelled yon shining bodies, as they perform their circuits, to yield up to thee their secrets? Canst thou lead thy lord and king out of the darkness? The burden of mine inquiry thou knowest —”

The astrologer bent his head in obeisance.

“As yet, King Manfred, no answer has been given! I have besought the seven good angels and the seven bad, beginning with the prince of the good, who, helmeted and girdled with flame, leads the winged hosts, and ending with Ahriman, the ally and consort of witches. I have

besought them all, — but the king must forbear! We cannot hasten our fate; we cannot retard it; the end is in the throes of its beginning.”

“Thou hast mine horoscope and the stars must respond to thee!”

“It is for me to observe the heavens, — it is for the stars to answer! But hearken, O king, — a strange constellation appears yonder, — one rarely ever seen in parallel, — perchance they will respond! If Mars be in the ascendant,” he continued, as if speaking to himself, while bending over the chart he glanced abstractedly first at the diagram before him, then at the heavens, but Manfred broke into his soliloquy.

“What then?” he questioned, eagerly.

“Then victory may crown the banners of the White Lily in the Crimson Field.”

“The mandate — the mandate! My spirit chafes at the delay! Canst thou not compel the stars to reveal themselves?”

“Neither to hasten nor retard, and waiting is but the wise man’s hour of preparation.”

Manfred’s voice sank almost to a whisper.

“Anxiety is an enemy to sleep! I will wait while thou concentratest thy mysterious forces on the orbs above, who hold so much and reveal so little of the glittering secrets of the beyond.”

“Destiny rules even the planets, King Manfred,” returned the Saracen, rising from his seat while he fixed his keen, dark eyes first upon the king, then upon the heavens.

“The stars have revealed themselves, King Manfred,” he said, at last. “The report which I founded on thine horoscope confirms to a wonderful degree the message from the firmament!”

"Speak, Ben Hussein! We would know the decree of fate!"

"Canst thou endure the bitterness of truth? For oft-times those high in station prefer the fallacious sweetness of deceit."

"Speak thy message, Ben Hussein. Whatever it contain, — we quarrel not with the messenger. Is it life or death? Victory or defeat?"

The astrologer heaved a heavy sigh.

"To him," he spoke, after a brief pause, "who ventures forth under this constellation, the conjunction does indeed promise success. But methinks that Saturnus, being combust, threatens danger and misfortune alike, whence I infer that the venture may be perilous or even fatal. Violence, death, and captivity are intimated by that adverse conjunction. But behold, O king, — behold! Heaven has unrolled to thee her own celestial volume!"

Manfred and his companion, who had hitherto remained silent, gazed in the direction indicated by the astrologer, and it required no further assurance from the latter's lips to satisfy the king that the object which attracted his attention was what Ben Hussein was observing and pointing to.

Far away upon the northern horizon there appeared, like a fiery dragon, a huge comet which wound its way through the myriads of stars, illumining the heavens. Its blood-red light seemed to cast over the silent, night-enwrapped world its lurid, unearthly hues, while the warmth of the Southern night changed to almost stifling sultriness, and moon and stars seemed to pale before the terrifying glow. Its fiery tail, dragging after it at tremendous length, seemed to whip the heavenly hosts and to menace the system of the celestial planets.

"Thou givest me no hope?" The king turned to the

Moslem, paling at the sight of a phenomenon which the superstitious trend of the times connected with influences of evil.

“The corpse-lights have shone upon Castel del Monte! These eyes beheld the funeral cortège of the dead emperor traverse the plains. Son of Frederick, — thy star has set!”

Manfred remained for a moment silent and closed his eyes, then, straightening himself to his full height, he extended his hand to the astrologer.

“I thank thee, Ben Hussein, — even for this truth. But the end — is it near?”

Ben Hussein bowed his head and a tear glistened in his eye.

“It is near, King Manfred, — it is near!”

As the king turned to go the white-haired Moslem suddenly prostrated himself before him and, clasping his knees, muttered in broken accents: “Ben Hussein has been the servant of thy father, as he has been thine, King Manfred; his whole life has been spent in the service of those he loved. Let me look upon thy face once more, son of my beloved emperor, once more ere I, too, enter the dark portals of oblivion. The black camel death is waiting for its burden.”

“Once more I thank thee, thou loyal friend of our imperial house! Go in peace and pray before the throne of thy God for thy unhappy king. Farewell, Ben Hussein, — fare thee well!”

The king and Ottorino slowly started toward the spiral stairway, while the Mahometan resumed his solitary watch. Ere they descended they paused once more, attracted by the beauty of the night. The waning moon cast her pallid, spectral rays upon the wide expanse of the Apulian plains. In the distance the princely Garig-

liano was rolling his majestic tide through the verdant, undulating landscape, sweeping his course along by mediæval watch-towers and the ruins strewn along the ancient Via Appia, still the principal thoroughfare from north to south. To southward the white walls of the ancient city of Troja rose into the starry heavens with their towers and battlements, while the comet, having taken a southeasterly course, hung threatening almost in the zenith of the heavens.

At last they descended into an inner court, where Manfred paused, turning to his companion.

"I have striven for right and peace and the highest ideals of mankind. I have aimed to give happiness and prosperity to my subjects, to raise them to a loftier pinnacle from the serfdom of centuries of darkness and bondage. I have endeavoured to make them remember their great ancestors, to respect themselves and their ruler, — it was the legacy of my noble father, who loved the Italians better far than his own native Germans! These are the crimes for which Clement has hurled his malediction upon us, — these the offences for which he marshals this foreign crusade against our lands! Our birth, our name, are an offence not to be forgiven, — but, though heaven itself blazon destruction upon us, the son of Frederick the emperor will die worthy of the name of Hohenstaufen!"

"Courage, King Manfred, — courage!" Ottorino Visconti exhorted the king. "While there is life there is hope!"

Manfred shook his head, then he muttered, speaking to himself:

"The corpse-lights have shone on Castel del Monte — Helena, my Helena, what will become of thee — of Manfredino, our child?"

Unutterable anguish sounded in the king's words, then, rousing himself with an effort, he extended his hand to the Visconti.

“With the early dawn we start! Until then, my friend — farewell!”

Bending low over the proffered hand, Ottorino withdrew and Manfred remained alone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPECTRAL MASS

THE moonlight lay upon the hazy mountain-slopes of the Basilicata. The birds were sleeping, and no sound of life broke the stillness. Only from convents and cloisters hidden in the valley beneath the muffled tolling of bells indicated the midnight hour.

A last glance at the stars, at the threatening comet, and Manfred continued upon his solitary way. Again the words of Ben Hussein knocked at the gates of his memory, but a feeling of resignation began to spread over his soul. The realm was not to be saved. There was an opposing fatality, an irresistible, intangible power arrayed against all efforts. He felt it at every step. In the midst of the most harmonious council some luckless dispute was sure to arise. While the Apulian barons seemed on the verge of conciliation, to that verge all approach was suddenly forbidden. Communications had actually commenced with Clement IV., promising the most certain results, only to be broken off,—none could tell how. The amazing treason of Altamura had struck terror and distrust into Manfred's soul. There was an antagonist somewhere, but beyond his grasp, an hostility as powerful, as constant, and as little capable of being counteracted as the hostility of the plague. The hope of victory had vanished, and with it the hope of life; he would never

survive defeat at the hands of Anjou. Worthy of his great name he would die, and with him the glory of the imperial house of Hohenstaufen would sink to a glorious grave. But unspeakable anguish welled up from his heart at the thought of his dearly beloved queen and of his son Manfredino. Could he but have prevailed upon Helena of Epirus to await the outcome of the impending conflict at Manfredonia, whence flight to the ports of her native land on the ever cruising Epirote galleys would be comparatively easy, he would more calmly have faced the issue. But the queen had steadfastly refused; neither prayers nor entreaties could prevail upon her high-strung soul. She would not abandon him who was part of herself. John of Procida had been commissioned to conduct her to safety if the worst should befall, yet Manfred feared—he knew not what. Lost in memories of the past, which reverted more especially to the day when at Otranto he had first met and clasped in his embrace the beautiful wife of his soul, Manfred crossed the court, turning toward the wing of the castle wherein lay the apartments of the queen and those of his sister Violanthe, Countess Caserta. His own entreaties and persuasion had tied the knot which had bound her life to Reinald Aquino, a union which had broken her proud, uncomplaining heart. On his way to bid a last farewell to these two ere the early dawn found him on the road to his destiny, Manfred suddenly paused.

Strange tones like distant organ chords, mellowed to the sweetness of Æolian harps when the dreamlike touch of the night wind passes over the strings, floated on the air. They seemed to come from the chapel, built and designed by Emperor Frederick at a time when the papal interdict had closed every church and sanctuary in the

land, and where he had continued to have high mass sung in defiance of anathema and excommunication.

The chapel was lighted, and as Manfred approached the tones seemed to increase in volume.

An indescribable terror came upon the solitary listener.

Who dared to brave the interdict in his own household? What meant that chant in the chapel of the emperor?

Racked with doubts and fears, Manfred slowly approached the portals of the sanctuary. The bars, which had not been unfastened in years, denied admittance. Irresolute he paused. The chant within continued. Determined to fathom the mystery at all hazards, Manfred turned to a door used only by the officiating monks, and after having traversed a labyrinth of corridors found himself before a portal, which was slightly ajar. The radiance of lighted tapers within cast a narrow, slanting reflex upon the walls of the corridor. Standing upon the threshold of the chapel, Manfred felt an icy shudder creep over his body, such as we experience when a terrible dream oppresses our sleep, paralyzing our limbs and stifling our cries.

Now he could even distinguish the words of the chant:

“*Lacrymosa dies illa,
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus—
Dona eis requiem!*”

But where was the invisible choir of the singers?

Manfred entered the sanctuary. After a few steps he paused again. Was it a dream? Were his senses reeling? Proceeded the chant from a choir unseen or spectral? And yonder monk at the altar, who with cowl drawn deeply over his face stood before a bier covered with a

black cloth, the ends of which he held in his hands, — who was he? His features could not be discerned; even his form appeared shadowy in the bluish vapours of incense, which, rising from two swinging censers by the friar's side and enveloping the chapel as with a mystic veil, curled in spiral wreaths to the lofty dome.

For a moment the king stood spellbound.

Within the ever deepening clouds of incense he watched the shadowy outlines of the monk. The censers appeared to swing of their own accord to the rhythm of the mystic chant, which, filling the entire chapel as with spirit voices, seemed to be equally strong, equally sweet and melodious on all sides.

Drawn onward by a force equally irresistible and mysterious, Manfred strode toward the bier. The cowed monk appeared to be utterly unconscious of another's presence, but the chill of death ran through the king's veins as he scanned the wan form that mumbled the last rites over the unknown dead.

The closer Manfred approached, the fainter grew the chant, the more dimly flickered the tapers, the more slowly swung the censers. At last he paused before the bier, and bending over it, started with trembling fingers to remove the cloth, the ends of which the monk held in his hands, hidden beneath the ample sleeves of his gown.

Suddenly the monk seemed to wake from his stupor. Raising himself to his full height, he flung back the cowl from his head, and simultaneously jerked the black cloth from the bier.

A frightful shriek ran through the sanctuary.

From the fleshless visage of a skeleton which peered from the cowl, Manfred, mad with terror, gazed upon the uncovered bier, beholding himself thereon lifeless, a ghastly death-wound in his head.

At that moment every light in the chapel was extinguished, monk and bier faded in the midnight gloom, and the chant ceased.

But Manfred the king fell swooning upon the cold mosaic of the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE OF BENEVENTO

THE morning sun of the twenty-sixth of February, in the year of our Lord 1266, dawned upon the plains of Benevento. A golden haze enveloped the eastern hills and a cloudless sky spread its azure canopy alike over the camp of Ghibellines and Guelphs.

Ottorino Visconti, completely armed, strode forth from his tent and, traversing the narrow pathways of the camp, made for an adjoining height, which permitted the gaze to sweep the plains and the camp of the Provençals. The hour was early and the camp was not astir. Only the sentries passed before the tents of the sleepers, many of whom were not to greet the light of another morning. The Lombard welcomed the early dawn, for sleep had fled from his couch, and, while he restlessly tossed in fitful half-slumbers, weird and terrible dream-phantoms had chased the peace from his soul. It was that last farewell under the walls of the witches' city, the parting from Helena, which now deprived him of his wonted courage and self-reliance, and for the first time he dreaded to meet the issue, knowing that Manfred's eagerness for the impending strife, which was to decide the fate of his dominions, came not from confidence in the justice of his cause, but from the anxiety of despair. The king trusted no longer

to his star. Since that eventful night at Castel del Monte, when together they had sought Ben Hussein, the astrologer, joy and gladness had deserted the heart of the Ghibelline prince, and the combined efforts of his trusty counsellors, the brothers Lancia, Capece, John of Procida, and Tebaldo Annibaldi, the Roman, had availed little to dispel the gloom which had settled over the once sunny disposition of the emperor's favourite son.

While musing over his own fate and that of the kingdom, Ottorino suddenly found himself face to face with Tebaldo Annibaldi, whose towering form seemed to rise without warning out of the earth before him.

"Caserta is in the camp," the Roman informed the Lombard, after a brief salutation.

"Caserta in the camp?" Ottorino reëchoed, reeling back as if he had been dealt a mortal stroke.

An expression of deepest gloom settled over the face of the Roman.

"Manfred is reconciled to the arch traitor, has forgiven him the loss of the passes of Arce and Ceperano — *quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat*. The fate of his house is upon him!"

Speechlessly these two then gazed into each other's eyes, mutely they clasped each other's hands for a last, an eternal farewell; then the Visconti continued upon his way, while Tebaldo Annibaldi reëntered his tent. Oppressed by a dark foreboding, Ottorino kissed and rearranged a scarf, the talisman which Helena di Miraval had at parting fastened to his belt, while the name of the woman beloved above all others lingered on his lips. Then his thoughts reverted to the hour. "A strange spell is upon the king," he muttered, as he continued on his solitary way to the end of the camp. "Alas, when we fight for a cause we despair of, we are lost!"

It was noon.

For the second time the Provençal fanfares sounded challenge over the field of Benevento, and from the opposing heights the array of the French knights could be clearly distinguished moving down toward the plains. Their banners and pennons waved proudly in the sunlight, and their hosts, as they began to spread at the base of the hills which they had occupied, seemed almost countless. The army of the Ghibellines was marshalled in three great divisions. Giordano and Galvano Lancia commanded the first; under their banners marched the German knights of Rudolph von Hapsburg, who had arrived in the camp at daybreak with eight hundred knights from Bologna, and the forces drawn from Calabria and Terra di Lavoro. The second division embodied the main chivalry of Sicily and Apulia, interspersed with Saracens under their own agas and chiefs, and was led by Conrad and Marino Capece. The third division embraced the flower of martial Italy and marched under the immediate command of Manfred, surrounded by his most renowned leaders, among them Annibaldi, Ottorino Visconti, and Frederick of Antioch. Here, too, was the main body of the matchless Apulian cavalry, to whom orders had been given to support either of the wings as necessity should demand, and here were the Saracen reserves. Manfred's strategy relied mainly upon the effect of the charge, and secondly upon the reserves, brought to bear at the exact moment upon the weakest point of the foe. All the horsemen were in complete link or net mail, armed with spears or strong swords and long oval shields, with the device either of the eagle or the lily. The Saracen archers, upon whom Manfred chiefly relied, were numerous in all three of the corps, wearing brass helmets

on their heads, with leather or quilted breastplates, and gaiters for the lower limbs.

In this order of march the Ghibelline army of twenty-five thousand men crossed the Calore, taking their position to the northwest of the city, near San Marco, in the field of Grandello, also called the "Field of Roses." Without waiting the signal for battle, the division commanded by Giordano Lancia threw itself with irresistible force upon the Provençals. Almost at that precise moment the Saracen infantry charged the Provençal cavalry, and so terrific was their onslaught that the first line of battle of the French was broken through and scattered like dry leaves. Before the close, serried ranks of the Germans, with their physical strength and veteran practice in their own special armament, the hosts of Charles of Anjou were mowed down as with a scythe. In vain they thundered in repeated charges against the stalwart Teutons, whose weapons were the long broadsword. The French line under Giles LeBrun wavered and gave way, and step by step, unbroken in their iron ranks, the Germans pressed onward, their cry, "Suabia! Knights!" rising high above the flagging sounds of "Montjoie! Montjoie!"

It was the defeat of his hosts which brought Anjou himself to the foreground, within plain view of the Ghibelline forces. Surrounded by Giles LeBrun, Count Robert of Flanders, and Guido de Mirepoix, he cried, "By the fleur-de-lis! our knights are but women in the garb of Provence! Ho, spears to the rescue! With me to the charge, Sieurs de Vendomme, Mirepoix, and Bre-silles!"

And, leading the flower of his chivalry, the Provençal came like a thunderbolt upon the second division of the Ghibellines. It was the body of troops under Marino and

Conrad Capece. At the command of their leaders the foremost line knelt down, leaving but their shields and spear-points against the Provençal horses, while behind them, the ponderous battle-axes raised aloft in both hands, bent forward the soldiery in the second rank, ready to smite and to crush; from the core of the wedge poured the shafts of the Saracen archers. Down in the dust rolled half of the Provençals, while their leader, unable to check the fire of his great steed, found himself borne into the third rank of the Ghibellines, dealing fierce strokes to the left and right. Suddenly his horse went down under him, and an avalanche of knights swept over the fallen Anjou. A thundering cry of triumph rose from the Ghibelline hosts when they saw their detested enemy sink mortally wounded upon the greensward. The Provençals, dismayed by the calamity which had overtaken them, broke their ranks, scattering in wild flight over the field. A cry of despair wailed through the French camp when the soldiers recognized the riderless steed and the equipment of their leader.

The main division commanded by Manfred had not even tasted of the battle, when upon his foaming charger Conrad Capece brought the tidings of victory. The king received the welcome messenger with bared head, standing erect, his stalwart yet slender figure void of theatrical pomp and bearing; his fair hair, the heirloom of his Teutonic ancestry, falling over his collar of mail, his cheeks flushed, and his clear blue eyes ablaze with victory. No more striking contrast could have been imagined between Manfred's appearance and the low brow, furrowed with ire and cruelty, the shaven hair of monastic affectation, the tiger eye, and the great beast-like jaw-bone of the sallow-complexioned leader of the French.

"The Anjou is dead, — the Provençals are fleeing, — long live the king!"

The whole division took up the shout and started in pursuit of the vanquished foe.

"Hold fast to your ranks! Break not the order of battle!" shouted Ottorino, when he saw the Apulians make a dash for the French camp, and, snatching a horn from one of the trumpeters, he sounded the return.

But it came too late. For like a tidal wave sweeping down upon a level coast an enormous body of knights, carrying aloft the banners of Clement IV., the red eagle in the white field with a green serpent in its claws, bore down upon the Apulians. The division led by the king received the full force of the attack, as its front, rear, and flanks were exposed, owing to the rash and unstrategic movement of the wings.

But was it a deception of the fiend?

Manfred's face blanched and Capece stared at the foremost horseman as if a spectre had risen from the earth. Had he not seen Charles of Anjou sink dead beneath the hoofs of his charger? Had he not, at the head of his own division, swept over his prostrate form? Yet, — there was no mistaking the fiendish leer of the one who headed the attacking forces. These consisted of the very flower of the Guelphs, whom the wily Anjou had concealed behind the hills, counting upon the very incident which had occurred. And so far did the Provençals outnumber the forces of the third division, reduced to almost one-half by the breaking of rank and discipline, that Manfred contracted his line of battle in the shape of a crescent, hoping to crush the French as Hannibal did the Romans at Cannæ.

"With heaven's help we shall yet win the day, — Lombards to the rescue!" cried Ottorino. Without wait-

ing the order he set off at a furious gallop at the head of his squadron, completely breaking through the first line of the French. But they were outnumbered a hundred to one. The raging battle soon closed around them, and Ottorino disappeared in the *mêlée*.

Rudolph von Hapsburg, who had been drawn against his will into the ill-timed pursuit of the vanquished Provençals, heard the signals from afar, and when he rallied his heavy cavalry to the attack the fortunes of the day began once more to waver. Then the Anjou's command rang over the battle-field: "*À l'estoc! À l'estoc!*"

Discarding the long sword exclusively in use among knights, the French drew the rapier, and whenever a German or an Apulian raised arm to strike, the insidious weapon pierced them through. The day of Civita in the eleventh century was repeated, when once again the Roman sword carried victory from the field.

Again and again new battalions of Provençals appeared on the edge of the plain, pushing back with irresistible sweep the disordered ranks of Apulians and Sicilians. Suddenly Rudolph von Hapsburg rose in his stirrups and, pointing to the field of Grandello, thundered the ominous words in Manfred's ear:

"Behold, King Manfred! The Apulians are going over to the enemy! Caserta leads the treason!"

As one paralyzed Manfred stared across the field. The divisions of Giordano Lancia had disappeared amidst the lines of the enemy; only the Saracens offered heroic resistance, pouring volley after volley of arrows into the serried ranks that came against them. It was the voice of Frederick of Antioch which roused the king from his stupor. Glancing around as one waking from a dream, Manfred's gaze fell upon John of Alifé, whose visage

betrayed little of the sorrow which the terrible act of infamy might have inspired.

"What seekest thou here in the ranks of men who fight and bleed and die for the cause of their king?" Manfred said, with terrible accents.

"I came to witness the victory of the just!" the chancellor replied, with a sardonic smile.

"Victory! It would have been cheaply bought had we not heeded thy treacherous counsel and retained thy perfidious countrymen instead of our trusty Germans!"

"I did but counsel the act,—thou, O king, art its perpetrator!"

"Now by the splendour of God! Since thou wert so brave in the council-hall, thou shalt thyself bear witness to the issue! Sidi Abdullah, lead forth the white charger which we ordered held in reserve and raise this brave warrior in the saddle. He shall lead us to victory or death, the first deed of honour his black soul has ever achieved!"

The chancellor turned deadly pale and sank upon his knees.

"Mercy, King Manfred, mercy! I am not a man of strife and battle!"

Ere the hunchback realized what was happening to him, he found himself raised by the hands of Abdullah's Saracens into the saddle of the snorting Berber steed and securely tied.

The heavy cavalry of Rudolph von Hapsburg thundered over the plain, headed by a crouching hunchback, who emitted unearthly yells as he clung desperately to the mane of his fiery, snorting steed, which kicked and tore at everything. When the French espied this singularly fearless leader, who plunged into their serried ranks as if he bore a charm 'gainst sword and mace, they wavered.

Finally, fully convinced that the Evil One in person was bounding in amongst them, they scattered in wild, disorderly flight, pursued by Hapsburg and the hunchback, who, unable to check the wild career of his steed, gave forth plaintive cries, invoking in turn demons and saints to deliver him from his sorry plight.

While the Saracen light cavalry dashed against the left wing of the Provençals, the French centre, unbroken and augmented by the king's own Apulians, swept down upon Manfred, who began to be sorely pressed. On all sides the Italians were now going over to the enemy. The import of Caserta's pledge for himself and the Apulian barons for the first time flashed upon Manfred's mind: "We will be true — until the last!" In vain he glanced around for reinforcements. Those of the Apulian barons who remained near his person, and whom he ordered to charge the enemy, flatly refused.

Presently Manfred's attention was diverted by a troop of horsemen who crossed the ford of the Calore in his rear, led by a knight of tall and powerful presence, clad in a suit of armour of antiquity so remote that the oldest on the field seemed modern in comparison. His esquire, who followed him, carried his shield, the blazonry of which had been almost effaced by time; he, too, was garbed in a fashion as far out of date as his master. Both wore their visors closed; lance, sword, mace, and battle-axe were the weapons of his mailed array, numbering about one hundred knights. The extraordinary size and strength of his horse, and its worm-eaten, though resplendent caparison of tapestry velvet, emblazoned with arms in gold and colours, added to the ominous effect of the leader's appearance. As the strange retinue advanced John of Procida exclaimed: "Why, — who comes here —

or what? It looks for all the world like the armour of Charlemagne from his tomb in Aix la Chapelle!"

By this time the strange knight had reined up his charger directly in front of the king. There was a moment of intense silence, broken but by the din of battle raging around the wings of the division. Manfred scanned the uncanny apparition with a feeling akin to superstitious awe.

"Wilt thou grant leave to one once thy vassal, now banished by thy decree, to take up arms in thy cause, even though it be lost?" The leader spoke in deep and hollow voice, which rang strangely in Manfred's ear.

"Thou art welcome, knight," the king replied, not without a tremor of suspicion in his tones. "But by what name shall we thank thee for thy timely aid, — for we are sorely pressed."

The knight raised his visor, but remained silent.

"The Duke of Lesina!" Manfred exclaimed, aghast.

"Even he, who remembers his oath of allegiance when others forget it!"

And without waiting thanks or response, the old duke, ordering his knights to the attack, galloped away and was lost in the thick of the fray.

At the sight of desertion which met his gaze on every point, Manfred's cheeks paled beneath his helmet, and for a moment his arm dropped as if paralyzed. The strange vision he had beheld in the stately halls of Castel del Monte rose once more before his inner gaze; again he heard the chant of the dead; it boomed in his ear, hollow as a death-bell, resounding above the din of battle; then the chant died, the vision faded, and Manfred was recalled to the sense of the present hour by shouts and cries

from the farther end of the field, in which the yell of Provençal triumph predominated.

A signal from Anjou to Giles LeBrun had conveyed to that commander the order for a mock charge on the Ghibelline vanguard, to be followed by a feigned flight, and so artfully had the stratagem been carried out that, despite the stringent orders of the Ghibelline leaders, despite the warning cry of the king, the Saracens, their blood heated by long contest and seeming victory, could not resist pursuit. They rushed impetuously forward, breaking the order of their hitherto indomitable phalanx, the more eagerly because the French had taken their way toward a part of the field where lay quicksands and marshes, into which the Mahometans trusted to precipitate their detested foes. But the tide had turned. With a wild laugh of revengeful joy Charles of Anjou set spurs to his steed, and, followed by all his chivalry, joined the cavalry of Picardy and Flanders in their swoop upon the scattered hosts. Already another division of Saracen infantry was setting in motion to rescue their doomed brethren, but too late. For now the choice reserves which had lain in ambush among the underbrush thundered forth. The whole of the Saracen armament was broken up, corps divided from corps, hemmed in; attack followed attack, to the front, to the rear, to the right, to the left. Fiercely as the combat raged, it could not long be maintained against such odds as the Saracens had to contend with, and the entire division was mowed down to a man. A fierce shout rent the air as Anjou's mighty hosts covered the whole of the field. Its lines seemed to blend with the blue horizon, aflame with the rays of the westering sun.

Suddenly Manfred heard the French war-cry in his rear, and, turning, he beheld the chivalry from Picardy

and Languedoc, led by Giles LeBrun and Robert of Flanders, sweeping the field like a tremendous tidal wave. At that moment the silver eagle surmounting his helmet fell to the ground, though it had been fastened in such a manner that neither accident nor human agency could have loosened it.

"*Ecce signum Domini!*" he exclaimed, turning to Annibaldi, who, resolved to live or die with the king, had not abandoned him since the battle began. Then Manfred cast one despairing glance over the field where the carnage was raging at its height. Everywhere he saw his ranks exposed; everywhere treason and desertion met his gaze; on all sides the Provençals were breaking through the scattered resistance of his faithful Moslems; none of his leaders were near him, — perhaps they were no more among the living; the day was lost, — crown, kingdom, glory.

One last glance at the transparent skies above, one last prayer for the wife of his soul and Manfredino his child, then, filled with despair, Manfred gathered around him the last remnants of his once so gallant host, and charged with Annibaldi into the very midst of the Provençals. Once more the king was seen towering high above his companions, high above the French, who swarmed about his little band as hounds around a deer; then he went down, — Manfred, the gallant son of Emperor Frederick, the poet-king of Italy, sank lifeless upon the Field of Roses, a death-wound in his head, and surrounded by the dead bodies of his gallant knights.

Soon the remnants of the Ghibelline host were scattered in wild flight over the plain, and Charles of Anjou, the gloomy victor, sat on the battle-field of Benevento, dictating his message of victory to Clement IV., a victory won by treason and crime.

Night had fallen upon the field of Grandello.

The victorious hosts of Anjou had forced their way into the ancient city, and a Bacchanale, such as history records but few, preceded the pillage of the old Norman capital of Italy. The stars shone coldly over the unnumbered slain; here and there a wolf or a mountain panther began to hold its gruesome feast. Only the moans of the dying or the distant shrieks of the vultures hovering over their lavish prey broke the stillness of the Southern night. The bells from a near-by cloister were tolling the tenth hour of the night when a woman, wrapped in a long black mantle, the ample hood of which concealed her features from the inquisitive gaze of a chance roaming pillager, strode slowly over the field of Grandello. At intervals she stooped to turn over a dead body whose face was hidden, then, rising from her repeated tireless task, she continued upon her dismal journey, not heeding the savage growls of the wild beasts whose feast she interrupted, and which shied away but to skulk back as she vanished in the blue haze of the Southern night.

Undaunted by the horrors of the scenes surrounding her, undaunted by the hoarse, hungry cry of the vulture, the savage glare of the panther, or the threatening growl of the wolves, the wanderer continued her search unflinching, untiring.

Hour passed upon hour; the waning moon shed a pale, spectral light over the distant heights, when suddenly she sank with a low moan over one of the prostrate dead, laying her face so close to his that it touched the cold, lifeless cheeks. Then she placed her hands gently under the unresisting head, raising it from its hard pillow, while in mute despair her accusing eyes were raised to the starry heavens.

His helmet cloven in twain, his face all streaming with

blood, but calm in its ghastly hues, Ottorino Visconti lay among heaps of the slain. The scarf which she had given to him at parting he had wound around his breast, and this had proven the cause of his death, for, as he had raised his arm to ward off the blow of his assailant, his sword had caught in the flimsy web, and before he could extricate the weapon he had sunk mortally wounded under the hoofs of his steed.

A wail of mortal anguish broke from Helena's lips, as she gently closed the glassy, staring eyes, kissed the frightfully mutilated head, and endeavoured to remove the blood from the pale, dead face. Only her piteous sobs broke the stillness of the night, as in frantic despair she encircled his neck with her arms and whispered words of love and anguish into ears dead to their caressing sound.

Once more she raised the bleeding, lifeless head, once more she gazed with unspeakable tenderness on the face she loved so well, once more she kissed the eyes whose light had been quenched in death, then she took a phial from the folds of her nun's garb and raised it to her lips. As the empty crystal fell from her nerveless grasp she sank over Ottorino's prostrate form.

"I am with thee—I am with thee!" she gasped. "How cold thy lips are, my beloved,—dost thou know me? Ah! My head swims,—it is all gloom—darkness—so soon? I will be with thee in that long, long night that knows no morn,—no waking. I can see thee no longer—my love—Ottorino—"

With her arms clasped tightly around his neck, Helena di Miraval sank dead on the field of Grandello beside the prostrate body of her lover.

The pale morning light of the succeeding day beheld a lone horseman speeding to southward and spurring his

steed as if pursued by an army of demons. The plains of Benevento lay far behind John of Procida; before him stretched the broad Apulian expanse. One of the few survivors of the conflict, he shunned the honours held out to him by Charles of Anjou, preferring to return to his native isle, there to mourn the death of Manfred, the son of his beloved emperor.

The Hohenstaufen rule had been swept from Italian soil, but less than a decade after an avenger was to rise who would repay the insults offered to his countrymen by the insolent Provençals, and the tolling of the bells of San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo was to be the signal for the extermination of every Frenchman on the island, the signal for retribution,—the commencement of the Sicilian Vespers.

EPILOGUE

AT Naples there is a legend that the beautiful Helena, the wife of Italy's poet-king, by command of Charles of Anjou was murdered with two of her children in Castel del Ovo, where she had been carried a captive, and that on All Soul's Eve a phantom with long, wavy hair and a sceptre in its hand used to be seen gliding along the corridors into the chapel. With the sceptre it touched a stone in front of the altar, the stone rose slowly, and from behind it came two children, who threw themselves on her breast. Then all three knelt in front of the statue of the Madonna, lifting their hands in prayer. And the infant Christ dipped his finger into the blood which gushed from the breast of Helena of Epirus, and wrote "Revenge" on the altar. In vain were all efforts to wash out the word; on All Soul's Eve every year it was renewed, until the night of the Sicilian Vespers, when French blood ran in streams. Then Helena of Epirus found rest in her grave and the apparition was seen no more.

THE END.

From
L. C. Page & Company's
Announcement List
of New Fiction

KILMENY OF THE ORCHARD

By L. M. MONTGOMERY, author of the "delightful and irresistible ANNE books," "Anne of Green Gables" and "Anne of Avonlea."

Cloth decorative, with four full-page illustrations in color by George Gibbs \$1.25

Miss Montgomery's new book — a charming love story — has again for its setting the author's favorite Prince Edward Island. Kilmeny Gordon, the heroine, is certain to prove as dear to the hearts of old and young readers alike as did her predecessor, Anne Shirley, "the dearest and most moving and delightful child since the immortal Alice," according to Mark Twain.

The following quotation from one of the early chapters will be sufficient to give a clue to the story.

"Under the big branching white lilac tree was an old, sagging wooden bench; and on this bench a girl was sitting playing an old brown violin. Her eyes were on the faraway horizon and she did not see Eric. For a few moments he stood there and looked at her. . . . To his latest day Eric Marshall will be able to recall vividly that scene as he saw it then — the velvet darkness of the spruce woods, the overarching sky of soft brilliance, the swaying lilac blossoms — and amid it all the girl on the old bench with the violin under her chin. . . . Her loveliness was so perfect that his breath almost went from him in his first delight of it. Her face was oval, marked in every cameo-like line and feature with that expression of absolute flawless purity found in the angels and Madonnas of old paintings — a purity that held in it no faintest stain of earthliness. . . . There was something very child-like about her and yet at least eighteen sweet years must have gone to the making of her."

COMMENCEMENT DAYS

By VIRGINIA CHURCH.

12mo, cloth decorative, illustrated \$1.50

Mrs. Church's new college story is based on the well-known play of the same name which had such a successful run last season, and it is hard to imagine a more truthful picture of college life than is here depicted. It all happens at that most interesting time of the college girl's career, Commencement Season, which brings with it a round of receptions, parties, coaching expeditions, Junior Proms, fudge feasts, and the happiest and merriest of times.

There are girls and girls, scores of them, all through the tale, and all interesting ones, too — there's Kate Wells, the most popular girl of the college, and Lorraine, her chum, quiet, dignified and sweet, who plays the role of an indulgent sister. And there's the twins; who really ought not to be twins at all, their tastes are so unlike, one preferring men, and the other sports, not to mention the slangy, masculine girl, who goes in for athletics, and the dainty little college flirt.

Of course there couldn't be any plot if a man were not allowed to enter in, and as Penny, the roly-poly Freshman, observes — "It's nice to see trousers around sometimes, anyway" — some mighty nice chaps are allowed to enter on the scene. Then there are three distinct love affairs in the plot, all in admirable contrast.

Girls who are in school and college will find in "Commencement Days" types that they have known among their own classmates, graduates will pick out old friends, and older women, whose school days are among their sweetest memories, will find that girl nature is much the same in this day as it was in theirs.

MY HEART AND STEPHANIE

By REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN, author of "Miss Frances Baird, Detective," etc.

Cloth decorative, illustrated with two portraits in color by A. G. Learned \$1.25

A goodly tale of love and mystery, with the scenes for the most part laid in New York and Paris, dealing with the intrigues and *causes celebres* of the Austrian Court. The story is woven around the Countess Stephanie, a Polish conspirator, and continues also the stirring career of the American girl, Frances Baird, the heroine of Mr. Kauffman's detective story of that name. A novel to delight the heart of every lover of fiction.

A CAVALIER OF VIRGINIA

By G. E. THEODORE ROBERTS, author of "Hemming, the Adventurer," "Captain Love," etc.

12mo, cloth decorative, illustrated by Louis D. Gowing \$1.50

Theodore Roberts is one of the younger writers of to-day whom the critics have been watching with interest, as he is a born story-teller and the possessor of an unusually fine literary style.

The scene of his present story is laid in the old chivalric days of colonial Virginia, although part of the action takes place upon the high seas, and the scene shifts for a short time to England, Spain and to the unsettled parts of North America.

The story develops the boy and girl love affair of the Cavalier and a typical Southern beauty, Isobel Dariza. The characters are admirably drawn and the reader follows with breathless interest the adventures of Francis Drurie, the Cavalier, through his stirring adventures on land and sea.

"A Cavalier of Virginia" is easily the finest story Mr. Roberts has yet given the reading public, and is assured great popular success.

THE COURT OF LUCIFER

By NATHAN GALLIZIER, author of "Castel del Monte," "The Sorceress of Rome," etc.

With four illustrations in full color by the Kinneys . \$1.50

Mr. Gallizier's new book, completing his Italian trilogy, of which "Castel del Monte" and "The Sorceress of Rome" have already been published, is a brilliant historical romance woven around the famous and notorious *Borgia* family, the main theme touching upon the perfidy and cunning of Cesare Borgia, that brilliant and unprincipled son of Pope Alexander VI.

Mr. Gallizier has chosen a most interesting field for his historical romances, and in his new book he tells with vividness and daring of the glamour and stir of the old days in Rome, the corruption of church and state, and the subsequent downfall of "The Imperial City."

Of "Castel del Monte" and "The Sorceress of Rome" the critics have written as follows:

"The author displays many of the talents that made Scott famous."—*The Index*.

"There is color, there is sumptuous word-painting in these pages; the action is terrific at times; vividness and life are in every part; and brilliant descriptions entertain the reader and give a singular fascination to the tale."—*Grand Rapids Herald*.

A SOLDIER OF THE REVOLUTION

By ROBERT NEILSON STEPHENS, author of "An Enemy to the King," "Philip Winwood," etc., and G. E. THEODORE ROBERTS, author of "Hemming, the Adventurer," "Captain Love," etc.

12mo, cloth decorative, illustrated \$1.50

The many admirers of the brilliant historical romances of the late Robert Neilson Stephens will be gratified at the announcement of a posthumous work by that gifted writer. The rough draft of the story was laid aside for other work, and later, without completing the novel, the plot was utilized for a play. With the play completed Mr. Stephens again turned his attention to the novel, but death prevented its completion. Mr. Roberts has handled his difficult task of completing the work with care and skill.

The story, like that of "The Continental Dragoon," takes as its theme an incident in the Revolution, and, as in the earlier novel, the scene is the "debatable ground" north of New York. In interest of plot and originality of development it is as remarkable as the earlier work, but it is more mature, more forceful, more *real*.

THE LEAD OF HONOUR

By NORVAL RICHARDSON.

12mo, cloth decorative, illustrated \$1.50

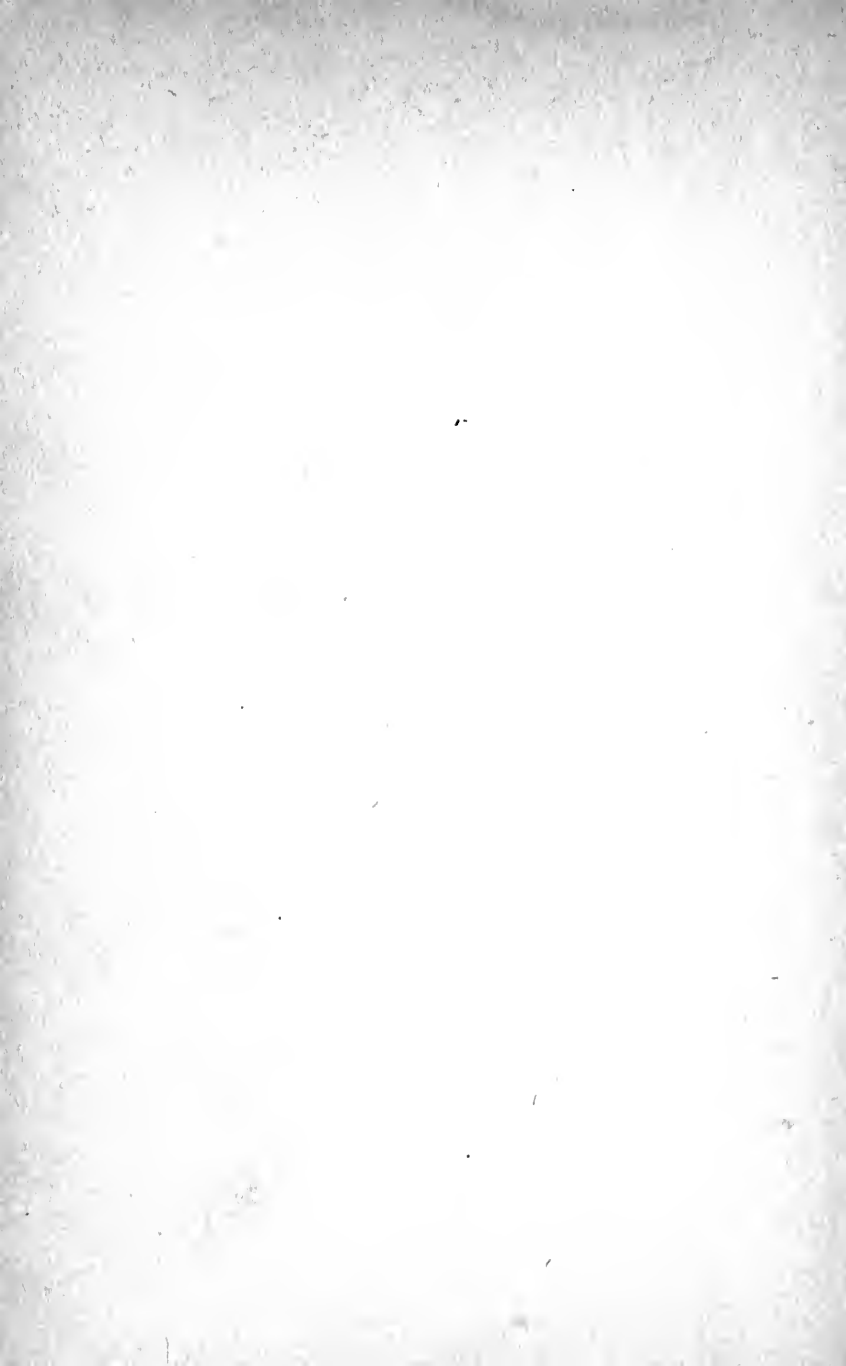
If this book is a criterion of what is to come, Mr. Richardson will take high rank among American novelists. His writing has a beauty of phrase, a poetry of expression that is unusual, and joined to this is directness and power.

His plot is well conceived and well executed and his characters are living, breathing men and women whose fortunes are followed with ever deepening interest.

The scene of the story is Natchez, Miss., in about 1830, and the central character is Sargent Everett, a young lawyer, in whom many will recognize a portrait of the Hon. Seargent Prentiss. Indeed many of the incidents of the story are drawn from the early life of that prominent statesman and silver-tongued orator.

Young Everett's struggle for recognition, his final success, his brilliant progress in his profession, are matters of absorbing interest. His love, his hope, his struggle with self, his temptation, and his renunciation, and always his steadfast following of the *lead of honor*, form the theme of this remarkable novel.

21.7.2008
AHEU



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 766 759 5

